



Terrorism Monitor

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IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS.....1

THE STRATEGIC REPERCUSSIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF IRANIAN-EGYPTIAN RAPPROCHEMENT
By Nima Adelkah3

FRANCE AND THE PROSPECTS FOR MILITARY INTERVENTION IN MALI
By Pascale Siegel5

JIHADISTS EXPLOIT SYRIAN TURMOIL AS THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ MAKES A COMEBACK
By Ludovico Carlino7



Sudanese Security Forces

SUDANESE SECURITY FORCES RAID ISLAMIST TRAINING CAMP IN NATIONAL PARK

A raid earlier this month on what was described as a Salafi-Jihadist training camp in a remote part of Sudan’s Dinder National Park indicated Sudan’s growing vulnerability to armed Salafist groups ready to take advantage of the Sudan’s deteriorating political conditions.

Sudanese sources say 13 individuals were killed and 24 arrested after an eight-hour gun battle in Dinder while others suspects managed to flee into the bush (Sudan Tribune, December 1; December 3). Dinder is a massive national park in Sinnar Province (eastern Sudan), roughly 400 km southeast of Khartoum.

Authorities were first alerted to the presence of the militants in October when the latter attacked wildlife police at the Galgu post in Dinder and seized their weapons. The attack was initially believed to have been the work of poachers, but authorities later determined it was the work of Islamist militants running a training camp in Dinder for would-be jihadists bound for Somalia or Mali (Sudan Tribune, December 1).

Sudanese authorities said the suspects belonged to a “Salafist-Jihadist group” and would face charges of murder, incitation and the formation of a criminal network. The detainees were described as university students between the ages of 19 to 25 who were supplied from Khartoum (Sudan Tribune, December 3). Despite being an imported ideology in the Sudanese context, Salafism has made significant inroads in Sudan’s universities and has steadily gathered more adherents in the larger community, particularly in the capital. Authorities in Sinnar Province said the *takfiri* group had no known links to al-Qaeda (*Akhir Lahza* [Khartoum], December 4). Ahmad Abbas, the governor of Sinnar, said the leader of the group was a chemistry professor, though he declined to name him (Blue Nile TV, December 3). There was speculation that

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two young men who tried to attack a prominent Sufi shaykh in Khartoum on December 9 were tied to the Dinder Park extremists (*al-Sudani* [Khartoum], December 10).

The raid came only days after Khartoum again requested that Sudan be removed from a U.S. list of states sponsoring terrorism, though Washington has been largely unsympathetic to such efforts so far. When South Sudan separated, Khartoum lost most of the oil wealth that once allowed it to ride out U.S. financial sanctions, leaving the regime in Khartoum desperate to find some means of rescuing its faltering economy in the face of growing public dissatisfaction. Though counterterrorist raids might help restore relations with the United States, Khartoum's increased military cooperation with Iran works against such restoration.

SUFI MILITIA JOINS SOMALI GOVERNMENT FORCES WHILE RAS KAMBONI MILITIA DISTANCES ITSELF

Somalia's new national government continues to make slow but steady progress in bringing the southern and central parts of the embattled nation under unified rule. An important step was taken on December 1 when the Sufi Ahlu Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a militia officially joined federal government forces.

The Ahlu Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a (ASJ) militia, approximately 1,000 to 2,000 strong, has its basis in a Sufi umbrella group formed in 1991 to defend traditional Somali Sufi Islam. The movement took to arms in 2008 when the Salafist al-Shabaab movement began to demolish Sufi shrines and the tombs of Sufi masters in the interests of banning the "un-Islamic" practice of "worshipping the dead" (see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 2, 2010) Two years later the ASJ aligned itself with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), though differences between the movement and then-TFG president Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad prevented al-Shabaab from obtaining the level of representation in government it felt was its due. The movement found more willing patrons in the Ethiopian military, which has provided it with arms, money and training as well as working alongside it in military operations against al-Shabaab in central Somalia.

Under the new Somali government of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud joint operations with Somali government troops have increased. In order to further cooperation with the government, the ASJ will now open an office in the capital, Mogadishu (Raxanreeb, December 1). ASJ members now hope to receive the same benefits as members of the national army though the exact method of integration has yet

to be announced.

Shaykh Mahmud Hasan Farah was re-elected as the chairman of the movement's executive committee in November (Bar-Kulan Radio [Nairobi], November 21). Shaykh Mahmud insists that the movement rejects all forms of "clan-ism and tribalism," but must play some role in the new state: "We are telling the new government that Ahlu Sunnah has no culture of opposing governments and we welcome it, but a government, in which we don't have someone to represent us cannot purport to represent us. We must have a representative in the government" (Radio Kulmiye [Mogadishu], November 18). The chairman's words were echoed by senior ASJ official Shaykh Ali Shaykh Ibrahim: "We ask the government, as Ahlu Sunnah wa'l Jama'a, to give special consideration to its relationship with Ahlu Sunnah wa'l Jama'a because Ahlu Sunnah has not taken up arms to fight the government but to defend Islam, after our clerics were killed, our saints tombs desecrated, and our mosques destroyed" (Radio Kulmiye, November 16).

However, it appears that the ASJ is no less fractious than the rest of Somalia, with a number of the militia's leaders in central Somalia resisting the appointment of Shaykh Mahmud as chairman and the new leadership council in Mogadishu on the grounds that they had not been consulted while their own leadership candidates had not been considered (Dayniile Online, November 19).

The movement recently vowed to launch new operations in central Somalia to "remove al-Shabaab remnants from the country" (Gaalkacyo Radio, November 17; November 24). Somali intelligence officials believe al-Shabaab has been receiving arms shipments from Libya and Yemen as it organizes a return to guerrilla warfare in rural areas after having been expelled from most of the urban areas it only recently controlled (Raxanreeb.com, November 5). Though al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri declared jihad in Somalia obligatory on "every Muslim who is capable," there is growing evidence that many of the foreign fighters in Somalia have left for more promising battlefields in Yemen (AFP, November 6). Somalia's Internal Affairs and National Security Minister Abdikarin Husayn Guled has said that the new government is also trying to integrate the southern Ras Kamboni militia into government forces, but at the moment the rift between Ras Kamboni and Mogadishu is growing rather than narrowing (Shabelle Media Network, November 29).

Ras Kamboni organized demonstrations in Kismayo against the new federal government in November that claimed the president was preventing the economic development of the Juba by preventing the export of the charcoal stockpile

and called for Mogadishu to leave the creation of a new administration in the Juba region to the eight-nation Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) (Dhacdo.com, November 9).

At the center of the dispute was the disposition of some four million bags of charcoal that was stockpiled in Kismayo before al-Shabaab had an opportunity to export it. The charcoal was worth an estimated \$25 million to \$40 million in Middle Eastern markets (Africa Review [Nairobi], November 4). Much of the Somali charcoal trade is dominated by businessmen with close ties to al-Shabaab and the trade was a major source of financing for the Islamist militants before they lost Kismayo in September (see Terrorism Monitor, November 18, 2010). The rapid and ongoing deforestation of southern Somalia by the charcoal industry has been described as an “ecocide” and threatens the long-term viability of the entire region.

Charcoal exports have long been illegal in Somalia and a further international ban on the Somali trade was imposed by the UN Security Council in February, these measures and an order to temporarily close the port of Kismayo from President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud have all failed at preventing Ras Kamboni and local businessmen from exporting much of the stockpile under the supervision of Kenyan troops belonging to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Nairobi and IGAD both support the continuation of the charcoal trade, the most lucrative industry in southern Somalia.

Ras Kamboni fighters shot up much of Kismayo on November 21 in the alleged “pursuit” of an unknown attacker who hurled a grenade at the home of Ahmed Madobe (Bulshoweyn.com, November 21). Only days later a powerful bomb went off outside a district administration office where Ras Kamboni officials were having a meeting (Mareeg Online, November 25). The Ras Kamboni militia was recently identified by Somali MP Abdullahi Hussein Ali as the source of the ongoing robberies and general insecurity that is plaguing Kismayo (Mareeg Online, November 13). The militia did little to enhance its reputation in Kismayo when it rounded up over 400 residents in an operation designed to catch a few militants by dragging a large net. The operation was defended by Ras Kamboni spokesman Abdinasir Seeraar: “I think there are some [detainees] who have connections with al-Shabaab and some innocents, but how can we know unless we make some arrests and conduct investigations; that’s when we can know who is the Shabaab member and who is not” (BBC Somali Service, November 2).

Ras Kamboni had previously ruled Kismayo jointly with al-

Shabaab after the city was taken by the Islamists in 2006. The movement joined the now defunct Hizb al-Islam movement in 2009, but the following year it underwent a split, with one faction formally joining al-Shabaab (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, February 4, 2010). While still an Islamist movement, Ras Kamboni now fights Shabaab extremists under Kenyan patronage. Nairobi views Ras Kamboni as a pliant local partner in its efforts to establish a Nairobi-supported buffer administration named “Jubaland” in southern Somalia under the nominal rule of Mogadishu. The plan has the backing of ethnic-Somali politicians in Kenya who have cross-border clan connections. ASJ has inserted itself into the debate, insisting any effort to form a new administration in the Juba region without consulting them would ultimately fail (Radio Risala, November 19).

There are also persistent rumors that influential Islamist and former Hizb al-Islam leader Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys is seeking to abandon al-Shabaab and join the government forces but is being held under close watch by al-Shabaab to prevent his escape (Dhacdo.com, November 23). Shaykh Aweys merged his movement with al-Shabaab in December 2010.

The Strategic Repercussions and Limitations of Iranian-Egyptian Rapprochement

Nima Adalkah

The November 21 ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has been credited primarily to President Muhammad Mursi of Egypt, who, with the encouragement of the White House, brokered a peace deal between the two sides to halt eight days of military conflict (al-Jazeera, November 20; al-Arabiya, November 20; *al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], November 22). Mursi’s ability as an arbiter demonstrated that the new Egyptian President could not only work with the United States despite his Muslim Brotherhood background, but could also successfully resolve a regional conflict and play a major regional role in the Nasserite tradition alongside Turkey and Qatar (*al-Ahram* [Cairo], December 2). While Cairo’s successful mediation has emboldened the Muslim Brotherhood’s grab for greater power over the creation of a new Egyptian constitution, in the background another strategic shift in the regional balance of power with distinct

security implications appears to be emerging: the revival of Iranian-Egyptian relations.

Cairo and Tehran severed relations in 1980, following Iran's Islamic Revolution and a decision by the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to offer refuge to the deposed Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Tehran's later decision to name a street after Sadat's assassin, Khalid Islambouli, continued to haunt Egyptian-Iranian relations right up to the political upheavals of the 2011 "Arab Spring." The April appointment of an Iranian ambassador to Egypt was a strong indication that a new era in relations might be under way (Press TV [Tehran], April 18).

Further signs of a possible rapprochement appeared during the Gaza conflict with reports of Iranian military assistance to Hamas. These included unverified reports of Iran smuggling missiles to Hamas, possibly with Egyptian approval, and an announcement from Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), that Iran had transferred technology and expertise necessary for the production of Fajr-5 missiles and smaller missiles to Gaza (al-Alam News Network [Tehran], November 21). These suggestions of military assistance were echoed in the words of Mohammad Reza Naghdi, a leading member of the Basij militia, who announced that Basiji forces were fully prepared to join the conflict in Gaza (Fars News Agency [Tehran], November 18). It is unclear to what extent Iran gave aid to the Palestinian militants, but the perception, both in the Middle East and the West, is that Iran played a major role as a provider of military equipment to Hamas.

In fact, perceptions of the military involvement of Iran in the conflict have been so pervasive that they encouraged Ali Ismail, described as a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, to suggest that an alliance of Egypt, Iran and Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah could "annihilate" Israel (Fars News Agency, November 20). Similarly in Iran, Dr. Kazzem Jalali (spokesman for the foreign relations committee of the Iranian Majlis [parliament]) called for development of ties between Iran and Egypt as a way to resolve regional crisis in a meeting with Egypt's interest section in Iran (Fars News Agency, December 4). The call for an alliance remarkably echoed the statement of the Hamas chief Khalid Meshaal, who thanked Egypt for its mediation efforts and Iran for arming the militant group during the conflict (al-Jazeera, November 22). But to what degree could such an "alliance" emerge with more than three decades of hostility between the two countries? Can old enemies become new friends?

Since the election of Mursi in June, the new Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Egyptian government has signaled

a new direction in the country's foreign policy. The most remarkable change has been the steady attempt to improve ties with Iran. Mursi's historic August visit to Iran for the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was hailed by Iranian news agencies as a sign that Cairo is turning its back to Israel and the United States (Press TV [Tehran], August 30). During the summit, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad described Egypt as "Iran's strategic ally" (Mehr News Agency [Tehran], August 30). In the aftermath of the NAM summit, new political and economic negotiations over agricultural and industrial sectors were initiated between the two countries (Fars News Agency, October 21).

However, there are issues standing in the way of a full restoration of relations between Iran and Egypt, particularly those arising from a changing political landscape in the Middle East reflected in growing sectarianism and competition between regional actors such as Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who are all vying to enhance their clout after the Arab uprisings of 2011. The key factor that has and will continue to discourage a rapprochement between Cairo and Tehran is the issue of Syria. Mursi's denouncement of the Syrian regime during the NAM summit displayed Tehran's inability to win over the Sunni Arab side, especially Egypt, the leading country involved in the Arab Spring uprisings that overthrew authoritarian regimes similar to the Assad government (al-Jazeera, August 30). Mursi's anti-Assad rhetoric was also a reminder that Iran's interpretation of the Arab Spring as "an Islamic Awakening" (as defined by the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), is not a monolithic Islamic current and that competing state interests still overshadow utopian pan-Islamist ideals.

The rapprochement may face other challenges. Since the uprising in Syria, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have found a common enemy in the Syrian regime, and much of this strategic alliance revolves around sectarianism and fears of a perceived Shi'a hegemony that have haunted Sunni Arab rulers since the fall of Saddam in Iraq in 2003. Though it had maintained close ties with Damascus since 1999, Hamas' move to Doha in February was a major upset for Tehran, a key financial backer of the Palestinian Islamic group (*Khaleej Times* [Dubai], February 28). Beyond the rhetoric of the Arab Spring, Hamas-Qatar cooperation in opposition to the Assad regime hints at a subtle sectarian front led by Saudi Arabia to curtail Iranian influence over the region.

However, there is one major factor that might encourage rapprochement between Egypt and Iran, and that is the possibility of a military conflict between Israel and Iran over the latter's nuclear program. In this case it is highly

possible that a strategic alliance between Cairo and Tehran could evolve with Sunni Arab regimes seeking to influence regional public opinion, which is strongly anti-Israeli. But this hypothetical situation may result only in a short-term alliance as many factors, including Washington's influence over Cairo, may prevent this from happening.

The reality is that the Gaza conflict has, ironically, brought Mursi closer to the United States. This is a major problem for Tehran, which is preparing for a major conflict with the United States over its nuclear program. Yet tensions still persist between Egypt and Iran that find expression in incidents like Cairo's delays in issuing permission for Iranian MPs to pass through Egypt in order to visit Gaza. These delays have angered many Iranian hardliners, who have described Egypt as playing a "devil's game" in continuation of the Mubarak regime (*Asr-e Iran* [Tehran], December 3). Egypt's continued relations with Israel, even after the Gaza conflict, have also raised new concerns among certain factions in the Iranian political establishment who criticize Mursi and Hamas for turning their back on Iran in favor of the United States or Israel (*Asr-e Iran*, December 2).

All in all, the future of relations between Egypt and Iran should be sought on the domestic level. While Egypt undergoes a major political transformation, with Mursi seeking to monopolize constitutional power and fight off rivals, Iran is also undergoing a major factional conflict over the limits of presidential power in light of the upcoming 2013 presidential elections. The Iranian supply of arms to various militant factions in Palestine may suggest that a faction within the Islamic Republic that actively seeks a confrontation with Israel and the United States may be pursuing a military option as a way to strengthen its political position on a domestic level. The military option could also include low intensity activities, such as arming Palestinian militants, which could nevertheless spark a major military conflict with Israel. Such a conflict could legitimize a more hardline government in Iran and marginalize the pragmatic factions within the Islamic Republic government. For Mursi, there is no military option, in particular in support of the military activities of Hamas, as it will embolden the secularists and the United States to discredit the Muslim Brotherhood as a party of radicalism rather than moderation. It is precisely because of these divergent approaches (Mursi seeking to appear moderate and Iran appearing aggressive as a way to ward off U.S. pressures) that an Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement will remain for now a distant possibility.

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France and the Prospects for Military Intervention in Mali

Pascale Combelles Siegel

France has watched warily as Mali has descended into chaos after the March 22 *coup d'état* overthrew Amadou Toumani Touré's government and the Islamist rebellion took control of northern Mali. [1] France threw the weight of its diplomacy behind regional efforts to restore the constitutional order and territorial integrity of Mali. However, a military intervention is fraught with dangers and uncertainties for France, which, suspected by some of harboring ulterior motives, strives to ensure that its involvement does not result in the summary execution of seven hostages currently held by Islamist groups involved in the occupation of northern Mali.

Mali and France share strong historical and cultural bonds. Mali belonged to the French colonial empire and remains a francophone country. As a result of these ties, a large Malian diaspora lives in France though Mali remains only a minor commercial partner of France, ranking behind Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Benin and Niger. [2] Although the French government works to expand economic ties and remains a major aid donor, counter-terrorism issues have recently dominated the diplomatic agenda as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has expanded its reach from southern Algeria into the broader Sahel region, including Mauritania, Mali and Niger.

France has long considered Mali to be the weakest link in the regional fight against AQIM. The reduced military presence in northern Mali as a result of peace accords in 1992 and 2006 enabled AQIM to use the area as a sanctuary and a logistical base to run the illicit activities that fund its operations (*L'Express* [Paris], May 14, 2010). Porous and poorly monitored borders allow AQIM fighters to come and go relatively freely. In response, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has developed several military cooperation programs designed to build the capacity of the Malian government in counter-terrorism and counter-trafficking, professionalize the Malian officer corps and provide training in peacekeeping. [3]

In addition, the rise of local Islamists in Ansar al-Din and their alliance with AQIM and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) in northern Mali has only heightened Paris' concerns, for the control of two-thirds of Mali by AQIM and like-minded Islamist groups is unacceptable. Officials in Paris foresee a risk that the region might turn into a "Sahelistan" where Salafi-Jihadist groups set up training camps and plot attacks on Western targets in Africa or Europe (*Le Monde* [Paris], August 4). French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves le Drian recently declared: "In Mali, it is our own security that is at stake, because if we don't

move, a terrorist entity will take shape which could hit this or another country, including France and including Europe” (Radio Télévision Luxembourg, November 11).

As a result, Paris has been lobbying members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Algeria, the UN and the U.S. government to organize a comprehensive international response to the crisis that includes a military intervention to oust the radical Islamists currently controlling the northern part of the country, a political negotiation with the “non-terrorist rebels [i.e. the Tuareg Mouvement Nationale de Libération d’Azawad],” and a blueprint for the restoration of the constitutional order following the March 22 coup. [4]

Two factors predispose the French government to be a key player in such an operation:

- France has continued to maintain a keen interest in the region. Since 2002, France and Mali have maintained high-level bilateral relations through regular presidential and ministerial engagements.
- The French military has a long tradition of expeditionary warfare in Africa. Moreover, France has prepositioned forces in the vicinity of Mali including a command and operational cooperation unit in Senegal; Special Forces units in Burkina Faso and 450 troops in Côte d’Ivoire as part of Operation Licorne (*Africa Defense Journal*, August 2; *Le Figaro* [Paris], September 20, 2010).

Yet, despite the gravity of the threat, Paris is unwilling to lead the re-conquest operation. As Defense Minister Le Drian explained, “France will support an African-led armed intervention in Mali, but will not initiate it” (*Ouest-France*, August 5).

Chief among French concerns is the fact that AQIM and MUJWA hold seven French hostages whose liberation France has failed to obtain so far. The fear, of course, is that a French intervention could cost the hostages their lives. Recent AQIM communications indicate that these concerns are not misplaced. In a recent interview, Jemal Oukacha (a.k.a. Yahya Abu al-Hammam), AQIM’s new chief for the Sahel and Sahara, warned that “the war option, apparently decided by Mr. Hollande, necessarily represents a death warrant for the French hostages” (Agence Nouakchott d’Information, October 20). Interestingly, French officials did not respond directly to the news, but Defense Minister Le Drian hypothesized that “a military intervention might also be the best way to ensure that kidnappings cease” (AFP, November 12).

Anti-colonialist sentiment is also a major concern. French officials fear that a French military intervention would trigger a difficult-to-manage wave of anti-French sentiment motivated by the belief that France is undertaking this operation to reinstate neo-colonialist control over a country

rich in largely unexploited mineral wealth. Malian and Algerian media are already replete with such accusations. According to Algiers University political science professor Ahmed Adhimi: “The West pushes into a military invention in the north of Mali in order to create a hotspot there and ultimately control the energy resources there” (Xinhua, November 15). Others argue that China’s intrusion in the French zone of influence is leading to a new wave of imperialistic ventures (*L’Expression*, September 2). In addition, some Malian officials believe that the former government of Nicolas Sarkozy played a double game by aiding and abetting the Tuareg rebellion this past winter, acting as king-maker despite claims that it respects the sovereignty of African nations (*Jeune Afrique*, March 9). Others have suggested that France wants to re-colonize nations it once occupied (*L’Expression*, September 2). AQIM has parroted this line as it is one that many in the region are predisposed to believe. In his latest video message, AQIM leader Abd al-Malik Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Mus’ab Abd al-Wadoud) accused France of wanting to divide Mali in order to enjoy its riches, which he says have been depleted by French multinationals. Droukdel warned France: “If you want war, the Sahara is a large graveyard for your soldiers and a disaster for your interests.” [5]

Algiers has publicly made the case against an intervention (*Jeune Afrique*, November 14). Its principled opposition is based on the concept of non-interference. Moreover, there appear to be significant differences between Paris and Algiers as to who should be the target of the intervention. Paris made it clear that “no negotiations can take place with armed groups that do not sever ties with terrorism and do not respect Mali’s territorial integrity.” [6]

Algiers seems to have a slightly different view, indicating that its main concerns are drug traffickers and those who do not respect Mali’s borders. As for those groups who want a strict application of Shari’a law, Algiers considers this an internal Malian matter (*Jeune Afrique*, November 14).

Meanwhile, Washington does not seem enthralled with the operational concept put forward by ECOWAS with French support. Washington worries that the intervention force is not large enough and that the Malian military is too destitute to mount an effective fight. Such concerns are shared beyond Washington. A former French intelligence chief speaking anonymously said that “The major risk is getting bogged down on the ground against an agile and elusive enemy in a region almost as large as France” (AFP, September 27).

Nine months after the coup that unseated Amadou Toure and the rebellion’s success in northern Mali, France appears increasingly isolated in its enthusiasm for an African military intervention as support for such an operation is waning, even among countries actively involved in counter-AQIM operations such as Algeria, Mauritania and the United States. Under these circumstances the possibility of a

military intervention succeeding is questionable.

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Notes

1. See Andrew McGregor, "Mayhem in Mali: Implications of the Military Coup in Bamako," Jamestown Hot Issue, March 12, 2012, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39177](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39177).
2. "Coopération économique - Les Relations économiques France-Mali," Ambassade de France à Bamako, <http://www.ambafrance-ml.org/Cooperation-economique,316>.
3. "Coopération militaire," Ambassade de France à Bamako, <http://www.ambafrance-ml.org/Cooperation-militaire>.
4. Press conference, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, October 31, 2012, <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo/mali/la-france-et-le-mali/evenements-19439/article/situation-au-nord-mali-q-r-extrait>.
5. Al-Shaykh al-Mujahid Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadoud, "The Invasion of Mali: A French Proxy War," al-Andalus Media, December 3, 2012, <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=43649>.
6. Press conference, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, October 31, 2012, <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo/mali/la-france-et-le-mali/evenements-19439/article/situation-au-nord-mali-q-r-extrait>.

Jihadists Exploit Syrian Turmoil as the Islamic State of Iraq Makes a Comeback

Ludovico Carlino

Iraq's armed Islamist front is beginning to see favorable results from a new phase in the movement's struggle that began in the summer. The plan, entitled "Demolishing the Walls," was announced in a July 21 audio message by Abu Bakr al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, the Amir of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a Sunni Islamist umbrella group formed in 2006 by al-Qaeda in Iraq. [1] Since last July, the ISI has been able to orchestrate an effective and geographically widespread bombing campaign in regions ranging from Mosul and Kirkuk in the north to Basra and Nasiriya in the south. Targets of the attacks include security checkpoints, government buildings, public places and Shi'a neighborhoods, with a resultant death of scores of civilians.

Although ISI attacks were persistent all over the country well before the announcement of the new campaign, the scale, coordination and impact of the operations carried out after al-Baghdadi's message are a clear indication of the group's increased operational capacity since the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in December 2011. However, the most striking feature of the "Demolishing the Walls" campaign remains the ISI's ability to launch simultaneous attacks in different cities through a combination of suicide bombings, IEDs, car bombs and armed assaults. The trend suggests that the ISI may be benefiting from the increased freedom of movement across the region generated by the Syrian conflict, with the group exploiting the growing instability along the border with Syria to move militants and weapons (*al-Akhbar*, July 19, July 27, *al-Shorfa*, August 27). This, however, is not the main factor behind the ISI's longevity.

"Demolishing the Walls"

Since its inception, the ISI campaign has followed a steady and constant pattern, with monthly strings of bombings demonstrating the group's ability to plan and perpetrate attacks. There have been five major waves of coordinated mass-casualty attacks in Iraq between July and September:

- On July 23, the ISI launched 22 attacks in 14 Iraqi cities, killing 91 civilians and wounding 224 others. The attacks, which mainly targeted military centres and police stations, all took place within a two-hour time period. The deadliest strikes occurred in Baghdad, Taji, Dhuluiya, Sadr City, Baqubah and Kirkuk (*al-Shorfa*, July 23).
- On August 16, the ISI unleashed a second string of major attacks targeting 19 cities, killing over 120 people. As in the first wave, the majority of these attacks hit the Baghdad area, with an armed assault against a military checkpoint in Moshahida resulting in the death of 20 soldiers and a car bomb in Sadr City that killed 65 people (Iraqi National News Agency, August 17).
- On September 9, the ISI expanded the geographic range of its operations with a string of coordinated explosions targeting 18 cities, including Baghdad and Kirkuk and points to the south in Basra, Nassiriya, and Amarah. The attacks killed over 110 people while focussing on important Shi'a symbols. Typical of such attacks was the double car bomb blast near a Shi'a mosque in Amarah. Security facilities such as the Intelligence Department in Kirkuk and foreign assets such as the French consular office in Nassariya were also struck by suicide bombers and car bombs (*al-Akhbar*, September 9, *Aswat al-Iraq*, September 10)

- On October 27, a day after Eid al-Adha, the ISI targeted Shi'a worshippers in Tikrit, Mosul, Baghdad and Sadr City, killing dozens (National Iraqi Agency, October 27).
- On November 27, the ISI launched 13 attacks killing 26 people in seven cities (*Almada* [Baghdad], November 28).

Besides these three major operations, the ISI has been launching other operations in line with the strategic priorities announced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, namely “releasing the Muslim captives everywhere, targeting the supporters and followers of the Safavid Government [a reference to the Shi'a dominated Government of Nuri al-Maliki] and performing jihad against the Safavid *rafida* [“rejectionists,” a derogatory reference to the Shi'a].” [2] While these operations point to a steady increase in the ISI's ability not only to stage attacks simultaneously in several cities but also to penetrate into Shi'a southern strongholds, the assault on the Tasfirat Prison in Tikrit on September 27 highlighted both the ISI's capacity to easily strike the security apparatus and to launch a sophisticated attack against a heavily guarded facility. In the complex assault, which resulted in the liberation of more than 100 prisoners, including dozens of convicted terrorists, ISI militants dressed in police uniforms attacked the prison with silenced weapons, hand grenades, explosive belts and car bombs, coordinating the operations with “the imprisoned brothers inside the jail.” [3] Security forces managed to regain control of the facility only after several hours of clashes in which 12 prison guards were killed, but not before the militants had destroyed all documents, files and pictures of the prisoners (*al-Akhbar*, September 28).

The Spillover of the Syrian conflict

Iraqi military and intelligence reports have confirmed the death or detention of more than 70 major military commanders or religious authorities working with the Salafist groups so far this year in nation-wide counterterrorism operations (*al-Shorfa*, September 9). This crackdown, however, does not seem to have had an immediate effect on the ground. U.S. officials suggested in October that since the American withdrawal from the country last year, the ISI has doubled its ranks (now around 2500 fighters) and has established new operational bases in western Iraq, most notably in the provinces bordering Syria (*Washington Post*, October 9).

The worsening of the Syrian conflict and the increasing porousness of the Syrian-Iraqi border are undoubtedly playing a role in the apparent resurgence of the ISI, lending weight to the hypothesis of a possible correlation between

the two developments. Iraqi jihadists were operating in eastern Syria well before the start of the conflict there, as the country was one of the main entry points for foreign jihadists going into Iraq to join al-Qaeda in 2004-2007. Included in their ranks were many Syrians who are now using tactics learned in Iraq against the forces of Bashar al-Assad. The facilitation networks have probably been reactivated and it is not surprising that, in the name of their “jihadist friendship,” Syrian and Iraqi fighters are now working together in the struggle against the “apostate regime” of Damascus.

The arrests of 11 suspected members of al-Qaeda in Iraq in connection with an October plot to mount waves of attacks on targets in Amman Jordan (including the American embassy) using weapons smuggled from Syria and advice from Iraqi explosives experts showed the potential for closer cooperation between jihadists in the region taking advantage of the crisis in Syria (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 22).

While the steady pattern of violence in Iraq in recent years suggests that the ISI's ability to launch deadly attacks has never diminished, the group is now benefitting from the Syrian conflict in terms of increased freedom of movement for arms and personnel. For instance, the total number of terrorist attacks in Iraq in 2011 was 1,300, a figure that indicates a noteworthy increase compared with the 1,179 attacks carried out in 2010, when the Syrian conflict had yet to erupt. [4] In the same vein, based on the first nine months of this year the rate of civilian deaths per day from suicide attacks and vehicle bombs is 7.3, a significant upsurge in terrorism-related violence compared with the 6.6 rate observed in 2011 [5].

Conclusion

As the spill-over of the Syrian conflict grants more mobility and freedom of action to ISI militants, three other major factors should be included when it comes to explaining the ISI's increased operational capacity in recent months. First of all, the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq cannot be ignored. The withdrawal has left the group without a strong opponent, leaving its militants more room to plot, execute and concentrate their operations. Secondly, the release by the Iraqi Government of dozens of detainees previously held in U.S. custody on terrorism-related charges could have resulted in the influx of veteran jihadists into ISI ranks, bringing their experience and enabling the group's tactics to become more sophisticated (al-Jazeera, January 18; *Jerusalem Post*, November 18). Finally, neither the political chaos in Iraq, where there is still no sign of a viable reconciliation process among the various elements of Iraqi society, nor the growing frustration among Sunnis towards the Shi'a-dominated

government, can be overlooked in explaining the longevity the ISI is enjoying in the country. These factors combined will likely play a major role in sustaining the ISI offensive in the coming months, as the spillover of the Syrian conflict will clarify whether the ISI remains a threat to Iraqi stability only, or whether the movement will become a regional menace. Should the Assad regime collapse and the jihadist groups consolidate their foothold in Syria, a closer and more formal cooperation between militants in both countries cannot be excluded, with ISI presenting itself once more as a point of reference for jihadists in the area and able to use Syria to expand its operations.

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Notes

1. Abu Bakr al Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, "But God will not allow except that his light should be," <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=172116>.
2. Ibid.
3. Islamic State of Iraq Statement, "On the prison raid at Tasfirat Tikrit," <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=180410>.
4. Data drawn from Global Terrorism Database (GTD), University of Maryland, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>
5. Data drawn from Iraqi Body Count, <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>.