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Alleged Death Photo of Mokhtar Belmokhtar

DEAD OR ALIVE? THE FATE OF MOKHTAR BELMOKHTAR

Andrew McGregor

Despite claims that “terrorist kingpins” have been eliminated in the secret war being fought in the Adrar des Ifoghas Mountains of northern Mali, evidence of such results remains in short supply. Most notable among those allegedly killed in the fighting is Mokhtar Belmokhtar (a.k.a. Khalid Abu al-Abbas), a veteran al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader who soared to international prominence as the self-proclaimed organizer of January’s devastating terrorist attack on the Algerian oil facility at In Aménas.

Chadian army chief-of-staff General Zakaria Ngobongue reported that Belmokhtar was killed on March 2 by Chadian troops during a battle in the Ametetai Valley. The Chadians also reported killing a number of other terrorists in the battle and the seizure of 60 vehicles, GPS systems and sophisticated communications equipment (RFI, March 3).

Evidence of Belmokhtar’s death remains slim. Radio France Internationale published a very low quality photo of a mobile phone image (essentially a photo of a photo) of what appears to be the partially revealed and blood-covered face of Belmokhtar, with the rest of the body concealed by a fabric wrapping. The original image was supposedly recorded on the cell phone of a Chadian soldier, though there are now claims that the corpse was actually that of Abd al-Hamid Abu Zeid, another senior AQIM commander (RFI, March 4; March 5; *Paris Match*, March 4; France24, March 5). Chadian authorities, however, have refused French appeals for proof of the deaths of the two AQIM leaders; according to Chadian president Idriss Déby: “It’s in accordance with the principles of Islam that the remains of these two terrorists have not been put on display” (AFP, March 4).

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Belmokhtar's Algerian AQIM colleague and rival, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zeid (a.k.a. Muhammad Ghadir), was reported dead on February 28 (*Ennahar* [Algiers], February 28). Abu Zeid was the leader of the Tarik Ibn Zayid brigade of AQIM. Algerian security services were reported to have examined the corpse and Abu Zeid's personal weapon at a military installation in northern Mali, but were unable to conclusively identify the body as his. The Algerians are now conducting DNA tests using samples taken from Abu Zeid's relatives in Algeria (*El Khabar* [Algiers], March 2).

An unofficial posting that appeared on various jihadi websites confirmed that Abu Zeid had been killed, but claimed his death occurred in a French bombardment rather than as the result of actions by the Chadian army. The message also claimed that Belmokhtar was "alive and leading the battles" and would release a statement soon (Sahara Media [Nouakchott], March 2; March 4). Adding to the confusion was a statement from rebel Tuareg of the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) announcing that it had turned over remains believed to be those of Belmokhtar to French military forces, though it was unclear how the MNLA came into possession of these remains (*El Khabar* [Algiers], March 4).

According to the French military's chief-of-staff, Admiral Edouard Guillaud, the death of Abu Zeid was "likely, but it is only likely," while on the death of Belmokhtar the Admiral would only say that he was "extremely cautious" (Europe 1 Radio, March 4). French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian also had his reservations over President Déby's claim that Belmokhtar was dead: "We can't be sure it is him... If the Chadian president can bring us proof, so much the better. If it is true it would be very good news but it would not resolve everything" (AFP, March 6).

MNLA spokesman Hama ag Sid'Ahmed confirmed Abu Zeid's death on the basis of reports from local notables and the testimony of the three young survivors of the French air raid that hit Abu Zeid's hideout. However, Sid'Ahmed claims that various notables who know Belmokhtar have reported he is alive and well but has left the combat regions. According to the same sources, Omar Ould Hamaha, the leader of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) was still active in the region between Gao and Tessalit (*Le Temps d'Algérie*, March 5).

The continuing hunt for extremists in the mountains of Kidal and the possible elimination of several top al-Qaeda leaders has raised concerns in France over the safety of the French hostages still being held by AQIM and its allies. There are many rumors regarding their fate, but Admiral Guillaud says

the army does not believe the hostages are with the terrorists in their mountain hide-outs: "We think the hostages are not there [where air strikes are taking place], otherwise we would not be carrying them out" (AFP, March 4).

In their search for militants, the French military is using French-built Harfang surveillance drones (previously employed in Afghanistan and Libya) and Atlantique-2 surveillance aircraft. Also in use is the Eurocopter Tiger, a multi-role aircraft that can conduct surveillance as well as carry out airstrikes. However, despite a lack of cover in many areas, AQIM's gunmen have proved remarkably skilled at disguising their movements and camps in northern Mali. The Tigharghar region of the Adrar des Ifoghas is especially suited for concealment and offers numerous opportunities for ambushes, as the Chadians have discovered. According to a French military spokesman, AQIM has established underground bunkers with pre-positioned arms and food depots in the mountains that fighters can move between with ease (AP, February 28).

MNLA fighters cooperating with French forces in Kidal have begun house-to-house searches for Islamists and are focusing on the residences of members of the Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad (MIA), a newly formed group of Tuareg Islamists who abandoned Iyad ag Ghali's Ansar al-Din movement when French forces began advancing into northern Mali (For the MIA and its leader, Algabass ag Intallah, see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, January 29). The MNLA continues to reject all efforts by the MIA to form a political alliance, saying that the MIA members "bear the scent of AQIM" (RFI, March 3).

Across the border, Algeria has stepped up efforts to prevent Islamist penetration by mounting extra patrols and reconnaissance flights. A multi-arm operational task force has been set up at the military base at Tamanrasset under the command of former Special Forces commander Major General Ammar Athamnia, commander of the 6th military region (Tamanrasset). According to one American report, the United States has also committed resources from the CIA, FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Joint Special Operations Command in the hunt for Belmokhtar and other AQIM warlords (*Wall Street Journal*, February 11).

So long as France continues to impose a blanket of silence over military operations in the Kidal region it will remain difficult to confirm reports emerging from the bitter conflict being fought there. The idea of Mokhtar Belmokhtar making a last stand, trapped by Chadian and French troops in the rocks of the Ifoghas Mountains, seems contrary to everything

we know about Belmokhtar, including his dedication to mobility and advance preparation of escape routes and caches of arms and supplies. Belmokhtar also appeared to lack the ideological conviction that was characteristic of Abu Zeid and other AQIM commanders. It is possible that may have changed in recent months, but the answer to that question lies in the true motivations behind Belmokhtar's attack on In Aménas, motivations that remain poorly understood as of yet. It would seem more likely for Belmokhtar to have made a break from his base at the town of al-Khalil on the Algerian border into Niger and gone on into southern Libya, where Belmokhtar established contacts with local jihadis over the last two years. He may also have sought unofficial help from contacts in Algerian intelligence formed during Algeria's long "dirty war" against AQIM's Islamist predecessors. In its need for morale-boosting news after suffering heavy losses in the Ifoghas Mountains, Chad's military leadership may have acted rashly by announcing the deaths of Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid. However, now that the announcements have been made, it has become essential to verify or dismiss these claims in order to formulate the future direction of the counter-terrorist campaign in the Sahara/Sahel region. Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid are too dangerous to be allowed to cast a permanent shadow over efforts to pacify and develop a deeply impoverished region whose problems cannot be solved by sectarian terrorism.

Notes

1. See "Chad and Niger: France's Military Allies in Northern Mali," Aberfoyle International Security Special Report, February 15, 2013, <http://www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=186>.

FRENCH COOPERATION WITH TUAREG REBELS RISKS ARAB RISING IN NORTHERN MALI

Andrew McGregor

The military situation in the Kidal region of northern Mali is growing more complex by the day. France is conducting counterterrorist operations in the region with its Chadian and Nigérien allies while soldiers of the Malian Army remain excluded from the zone at the request of two Tuareg rebel groups Bamako would like to eliminate – the separatist Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) and the Islamist Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad (MIA), recently formed by defectors from Iyad ag Ghali's Ansar al-Din. It is France's military cooperation with the MNLA (and

to a lesser extent with the MIA) in securing Kidal that is now threatening to ignite a tribal war in northern Mali.

For France, cooperation with the Tuareg MNLA is a military necessity. The movement is largely drawn from the local Ifoghas Tuareg and guides with intimate knowledge of the terrain are essential in the campaign to exterminate the well-armed Islamists hidden in the caves, rocks and vegetation of the mountainous Tigharghar region. Likewise, the MIA is seen as useful in tracking down fugitive Tuareg Islamists from Ansar al-Din, including the movement's leader, Iyad ag Ghali. The Islamists have already proven their ability to launch devastating ambushes on the counterterrorist forces. For northern Mali's Arab minority, however, the military alliance between intervention forces and the Tuareg rebels has revived the ancient rivalry between the Arab tribes and the Berber Tuareg. With this rivalry now erupting into armed clashes and the Malian Army (largely composed of Black African tribes from the south) now accused of excesses against the lighter-skinned Tuareg and Arabs in Timbuktu and Gao, the French military now faces the danger of being drawn into a new tribal conflict that will inevitably set back efforts to rid northern Mali of jihadis and narco-traffickers.

Arabs form approximately 10% of northern Mali's population of 1.2 million, while the Tuareg account for roughly 50%. The main Arab groups are the Bérabiche (who worked closely with the French in the original conquest of northern Mali 119 years ago), the "noble" Kunta and the Telemsi. The Arab tribes are not any better known for inter-tribal cooperation than the fractious Tuareg tribes.

The situation in Kidal was described by Muhamad Mahmud al-Oumrany, a former ambassador and the current president of the Arab Community of Mali:

The whole Arab community, which was residing in Al-Khalil, was forced to evacuate the town. It is the first time that ethnic cleansing by a community of another. The cause is that the Kidal area is regarded today as a safe haven for the MNLA. There is no Malian army to restore stability, to restore the law. It is only the MNLA that is in the region. It loots and if any protest is made, it runs to the French army to say: "These are Islamists. They are terrorists." It is an unacceptable situation and it is going to lead definitely to a clash between the Arab and Tuareg communities (RFI, March 3).

Al-Oumrany is more favorable to the MIA, under the leadership of Algabass ag Intallah, saying that the noble Intallah family is the key to restoring security to the Kidal region (RFI, March 3).

Unfortunately for the Arabs, their community is hardly free of associations with AQIM and its ally, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). Many of the Bérabiche Arabs of northern Mali have cooperated with the AQIM presence for several years out of a combination of economic necessity and ethnic solidarity. For some Arabs, it is the ideological appeal of al-Qaeda that has drawn them into their ranks. Omar Ould Hamaha, a Timbuktu Bérabiche Arab, is the leader of MUJWA and recently formed a local Bérabiche version of Ansar al-Shari'a on December 9, 2012 to protect Arab interests and promote jihad in the Arab community.

The Arab community in Timbuktu has warned of retaliatory ethnic violence in the wake of abuses committed by the Malian Army and even other civilians who do not differentiate between Malian Arabs and al-Qaeda jihadists (RFI, February 23). The community has sent representatives to Paris to plead their case and is urging that Colonel Ould Meydou, a Telemesi Arab, be released from Bamako to lead his largely Bérabiche Arab militia into Timbuktu to restore order (RFI, February 23). The colonel is unpopular with the Malian Army putschists, who have refused to allow him to use his considerable desert-fighting skills against the Islamists. The MNLA strongly dislike Meydou – many of them have clashed with him before in earlier Tuareg rebel formations.

Arab refugees in Mauritania have also mounted protests against what they describe as “ethnic cleansing” by the Malian Army, citing a number of massacres, missing people taken by soldiers and other disorders that are difficult to confirm in the tight information regime currently imposed on northern Mali (*al-Akhbar* [Nouakchott], February 20; February 22). Despite this, a number of Malian officers and men have been recalled to Bamako for investigation into human rights abuses committed in the wake of the French advance.

In response to these abuses, the Arab community of northern Mali has created a secular self-defense militia with an estimated 500 members. The Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA) was created in February, 2012 as the Front de Libération nationale de l'Azawad (FNLA) and formed from members of earlier Arab militias and Arab soldiers of the Malian Army who defected after the fall of Timbuktu. Since the rebellion began last year, the movement has drawn increasing numbers of young Arab men looking for some form of protection for their community (Sahara Press, January 12, 2012). The MAA has two strongholds in northern Mali, the first at Telemesi near the Mauritanian border and the second at Tinareg close to the border with Algeria.

MAA secretary general Ahmad Ould Sidi Muhammad has warned of an ethnic conflict between Arabs and Tuareg and has called for Mauritania and Algeria to be aware of “the grave danger of this unholy alliance between France and the MNLA and the dangerous implications for the region's people” (Sahara Media, March 4).

A large number of Arabs from Timbuktu took refuge from the Malian Army in the border town of al-Khalil (or In Khalil), a small but strategically important town that controls both smuggling and legal trade across the Algerian border. As such, it formed the last base for AQIM Amir Mokhtar Belmokhtar before it was occupied by the French. After the arrival of the French, the Arab refugees began to complain of rough treatment by the MNLA, including car-theft, looting and ultimately rape (Algerie1.com, February 23). The MNLA occupation, according to the movement, was designed to cut off the Islamists in the Adrar des Ifoghas from food, fuel and other supplies brought in by smugglers.

On February 23, a column of up to 30 vehicles attacked the MNLA based at al-Khalil. The MNLA claimed that they were under attack from elements of MUJWA under Ould Hamaha supported by Ansar al-Shari'a and MAA fighters under the command of MAA chief-of-staff Colonel Hussein Ould Ghulam, a defector from the national army (*Combat* [Bamako], February 23). The MNLA succeeded in selling this version of events to the French, who launched airstrikes on the MAA, destroying several vehicles. The MAA withdrew from the attack and returned to their base in the In Farah region close to the border with Algeria, furious at the French intervention on behalf of the MNLA (RFI, February 25). MUJWA claimed responsibility for two car bombs that went off in near MNLA checkpoints that killed two Tuareg fighters on February 22, but made no comment on their alleged role in a battle with the MNLA and French units (RFI, February 23).

An MAA leader, Boubacar Ould Talib, suggested that it was “illogical” for the MAA to cooperate with the Islamists: “We came to al-Khalil to ensure the security and safety of the Arab interests and we will never coordinate with the terrorists in that.” Ould Talib also stated that the MAA was ready to coordinate in counterterrorist efforts with the French at any time (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 27). The day after the attack on al-Khalil there were fresh clashes between the MAA and MNLA near Tessalit, where the Arab movement claimed the MNLA Tuaregs had committed numerous abuses against the Arab residents (RFI, February 24).

French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has said: “In Kidal, we are living a particular situation and we do our

best to be on good terms with the Tuaregs” (RFI, February 23). However, the defense minister has here ignored the fact that French forces are also fighting alongside the Imghad Tuareg militia led by Colonel al-Hajj ag Gamou, bitter enemies of the Ifoghas leadership of the MNLA and the MIA. At some point, all the contradictions of the French campaign in northern Mali will catch up with it, unless the French succeed in pulling out first. In either case, the hastily-planned intervention has consistently ignored the political and sociological aspects of the campaign, likely at a great future cost to the inhabitants of northern Mali.

A Divided Society: The Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Lebanon

Nicholas A. Heras

The Lebanese state and Lebanon’s most powerful political actors are increasingly challenged by the ongoing conflict in Syria. Lebanon’s feuding anti-Assad March 14 and pro-Assad March 8 political blocs continue to follow distinct strategies of opposition or support for the Assad government that are contrary to the Lebanese state’s official position of neutrality in the Syrian conflict. Several recent events in Lebanon have renewed the regional and international focus on the potential threat to Lebanese security posed by the worsening violence in Syria.

At present, fierce fighting continues in three areas of Syria that border Lebanon:

- In and around the Syrian city of Tal Kalakh in Homs Province which abuts Lebanon’s northern Akkar region
- In and around the Syrian city of Homs that abuts the northeastern region of Lebanon’s Beka’a Valley
- In the Damascus exurb of Zabadan that abuts the central region of Lebanon’s Beka’a Valley

In all these border areas, the Syrian military daily sends artillery shells against Syrian opposition groups based near or on the Lebanese side of the border, conducts brief border incursions in pursuit of fleeing refugees alleged to harbor armed opposition members and, in cooperation with the Lebanese military, interdicts individuals and organizations trying to smuggle people and material across the border. The continuing Syrian incursions into Lebanon have been heavily criticized by the United Nations (*Daily Star* [Beirut], March 1).

Homs’ suburbs near the Lebanese border include 23 villages and 12 farmsteads that have a large, diverse population that claims Lebanese citizenship due to unclear border demarcations. The areas have a large population of Shi’a and Christians that have sought the protection of Hezbollah and are close to an intra-provincial highway that could become a corridor of retreat and supply for a post-Assad Alawite-dominated region of Syria (CSM, February 22).

The border region is increasingly becoming the site of fierce combat between the Syrian military and its allies (which reportedly include Hezbollah) and the Syrian armed opposition, reinforced by some Lebanese Sunni fighters. The Syrian opposition alleges that Hezbollah has moved fighters into eight villages in the region around Homs and has attacked several mixed or Sunni-majority villages with Katyusha rockets (Reuters, February 17).

One battle in the area in the middle of February was reported to have killed three Hezbollah fighters, five Syrian opposition fighters and two Shi’a residents of the area (AFP, February 17). As a result of the fighting, General Salim Idriss, the chief-of-staff of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA), announced that the FSA would attack Hezbollah assets in Lebanon if it did not halt its operations in Syria (al-Arabiya, February 20). Those border towns and villages of northern Lebanon with a significant Sunni population are reported to provide strategic depth for Syrian armed opposition groups fighting for the control of Homs, including the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra movement (*al-Akhhbar* [Beirut], February 25).

In northern Lebanon the Lebanese military is in a paradoxical situation. A significant number of Lebanese soldiers are Sunni, many of whom are from the regions of northern Lebanon. In northern Lebanon, the Lebanese military as an institution is at best on uneasy terms with the local population, requiring it to negotiate with local power-brokers such as clan and municipality leaders. In the context of rising local tensions due to the conflict across the border, failure to notify these authorities of military operations can severely complicate efforts of the Lebanese military to carry out its mandate. [1]

There are also reports of tensions arising within the Lebanese military due to Lebanese society’s polarized perspective on support for or against the Syrian opposition and a belief in some quarters that the Lebanese Army’s leadership is sympathetic to the Assad regime. Lebanese military sources report slowly rising tensions between Sunni soldiers and their non-Sunni compatriots in some military companies deployed in northern Lebanon. These tensions are alleged to be the result of the suspicion that some Sunni soldiers are unreliable compatriots and are more loyal to northern Lebanese militant groups, some linked to militant Salafist fighting networks linking northern Lebanon to Syria, than they are to Lebanon and the Lebanese military. [2]

The Lebanese military's recent operation in Arsal is an example of these tensions. On February 2, Lebanese military intelligence units and Special Forces entered into a firefight with residents of Arsal after intelligence agents arrested a resident of the town named Khalid Hmayyed and were subsequently attacked by the town's residents. The violence killed Hmayyed and another resident of Arsal and two Lebanese soldiers. A number of other soldiers and residents of the town were wounded in the clashes (*Daily Star* [Beirut], February 2).

Hmayyed was wanted by Lebanese security forces as an alleged member of al-Qaeda with connections to the Syrian Salafist armed group Jabhat al-Nusrah (*al-Akhbar*, February 2). He was also believed to be one of the planners directing the kidnapping of seven Estonian cyclists touring Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley in June 2011 (*Daily Star* [Beirut], February 9). The operation in Arsal led to a backlash against the Lebanese government from Lebanese supporters of the Syrian opposition and politicians of the March 14 bloc and assertions of support for the Lebanese military amidst the fear of a rising armed Salafist presence in Lebanon.

The incident in Arsal created a public outcry in Lebanon over the ongoing challenges to the country posed by the Syrian civil war. Some opponents of the Arsal operation, many of them from the March 14 bloc, stated that the Lebanese military was actively working with Hezbollah and pro-Assad Syrian paramilitary units to intimidate and kill anti-Assad Lebanese and Syrians (NOW Lebanon, February 3). However, several prominent Lebanese politicians, including Saad Hariri, the leader of the Sunni-majority Future Movement, issued statements defending the Lebanese military (*al-Mustaqbal* [Beirut], February 5). Supporters of the Lebanese military's authority to conduct the Arsal operation demonstrated throughout Lebanon and blocked several highways to protest the killing of the soldiers (*an-Nahar* [Beirut], February 4).

Further public outcry in Lebanon concerning the Syrian conflict was caused by the continued shipment of kerosene and diesel fuel from Lebanon to the Syrian government. The sale of the fuel is controversial because it is purchased by Lebanese companies and then resold in Syria, potentially violating international sanctions against conducting business with the Syrian government, though the international sanctions are not recognized by the Lebanese government (*Daily Star*, February 12). Organized in some areas by Sunni clerics, anti-Assad demonstrators blocked several major highways in the country (*al-Akhbar*, February 13). Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati has described Lebanon's difficulties as the Syrian conflict rages only a short distance away:

Lebanon is in a delicate situation. Syria controls 80 percent of our land borders. It is easy to speak when you are far away. My wish is to dissociate Lebanon from what's happening in Syria. Our society is divided, almost

in half, between supporters and opponents of the Syrian regime. I don't know how these events will end. Lebanon has no defenses against negative developments. Let's keep out of it (*Le Monde*, February 8).

The conflict in Syria has also contributed to an accelerated movement of refugees into Lebanon, with estimates that 320,000 displaced Syrians are now residents in the country, most of them living amongst the Lebanese population in impoverished areas of country. In response to the rapid growth in the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the Lebanese government is calling for international donations of \$320 million, an amount that has yet to be raised (*an-Nahar*, March 1). The growing number of Syrians in Lebanon has led to a general acceptance of a temporary presence of Syrians by Lebanese politicians from both political blocs. A notable exception is Lebanese Interior Minister Marwan Charbel, a member of the nominally pro-Assad Free Patriotic Movement, who sparked significant controversy by stating that Syrian refugees were armed and outside of Lebanese state control, thus forming a threat to Lebanon's security (*Reuters Arabic*, February 28). Charbel had earlier asserted that Syrian opposition members posing as refugees were being trained in armed camps in northern Lebanon (*as-Safir*, January 4).

The ongoing environment of insecurity in Lebanon is having an effect upon the country's socio-economic and political stability. In an uncertain security environment with a large influx of Syrian refugees into the country, a significant number of whom may be armed fighters, the Lebanese military's ability to respond to these evolving threats is severely limited by the country's politicized sectarianism. In many regions of Lebanon, the military is not perceived as a national institution representing all Lebanese, but just another militia.

As Lebanon moves towards planned Parliamentary elections in June, the question of Lebanon's role in the Syrian crisis will present a difficult political choice for certain communities, particularly the Christians. Lebanon's Christian community is generally split between support for pro and anti-Assad political parties, but in an environment where the fear of a rising militant Salafist presence amongst Christians is growing, tenuous political allegiances may be switched to support parties, particularly the Free Patriotic Movement, that are aligned with what is widely seen in Lebanon as the greatest guarantee against Sunni militancy in Lebanon, Hezbollah. [3]

Notes

1. Information in this paragraph is based on interviews conducted by the author with a Lebanese Army source with extensive operational experience throughout Lebanon who requested anonymity due to being on active duty. Interviews conducted on February 3 and 18, 2013.

2. Ibid

3. Interviews conducted by the author with Lebanese Christian youth between the ages of 17-35 from Christian-majority districts throughout Lebanon. Interviews conducted between November 2012 and February 2013.

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The Growing Alliance between Uzbek Extremists and the Pakistani Taliban

Jacob Zenn

The U.S. drone strike that killed Maulvi Nazir in South Waziristan on January 2 eliminated a key local leader who resisted the presence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in South Waziristan. From a U.S. perspective, Nazir was a target because he provided safe havens and training camps in the South Waziristan capital of Wana from which militants could launch cross-border raids against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Nazir, however, was also an enemy of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP, or Pakistani Taliban, had opposed Nazir since the summer of 2009, when Nazir agreed to a non-aggression pact with the Pakistani government before the Pakistani army launched an offensive against the TTP in South Waziristan. Islamabad thus considered Nazir a “good Taliban,” even as he ordered his fighters to attack U.S. forces in Afghanistan (*Dawn* [Karachi], January 4).

Like the TTP, the IMU also opposed Nazir, and only five weeks before the drone strike that killed Nazir on January 2, a teenage suicide bomber sent by the IMU (likely with TTP backing) failed in an attempt to kill Nazir in Wana (*The News* [Islamabad], November 29, 2012). The IMU rivalry with Nazir began in 2007, when Nazir ordered an estimated 3,000 of his fighters to expel the IMU from Wana (see *Terrorism Monitor*, January 14, 2008). In the fighting, between 50 and 200 IMU militants were killed, while hundreds of other Uzbeks fled to other areas of South Waziristan and North Waziristan and possibly even to Afghanistan to join the Afghan Taliban in Helmand Province (*Newline* [Karachi], June 10, 2007).

The Uzbeks in the IMU first arrived in South Waziristan *en masse* in 2002 to escape the U.S. rout of the IMU from its bases in northern Afghanistan. However, Nazir disliked the Uzbeks because they were reluctant to carry out attacks against U.S. forces in Afghanistan, focusing instead on carrying out joint attacks with the TTP against the Pakistani government. In addition, the Uzbeks who settled in South Waziristan increasingly interfered with local tribal and religious affairs, which angered Nazir.

With Nazir eliminated, it falls upon his successor, Bahawal Khan, to maintain the truce with the Pakistani army. However, if Khan is unable to do so, or if Nazir’s fighters seek revenge against the Pakistan government for allegedly aiding the U.S. drone program, then the truce between Nazir’s fighters and Pakistan may not hold. This would allow the IMU to reassert itself in Wana and carry out more attacks in Peshawar and the tribal areas, where the IMU has been increasingly active in recent months.

IMU militants participated in a TTP attack on the Peshawar air force base on December 16, 2012 that killed five people. This attack conformed to the TTP’s recent strategy of avoiding large-scale attacks in cities that kill a large number of civilians in favor of targeting military installations (*The Nation* [Islamabad], December 17, 2012). According to Pakistani security officers, IMU militants are known for their “ferocity, alacrity and training” and willingness to participate in high-risk operations (*Dawn*, December 18, 2012). Such operations include the attack on Mehran Naval base in Karachi on May 22, 2011, which was launched in retaliation for Osama bin Laden’s death, and the August 2012 attack on the Kamra Air base of the Pakistan Air Force in the Punjab region (*The News* [Islamabad], December 18, 2012; *Dawn* [Karachi], December 18, 2012). In Afghanistan, major IMU attacks include an attack on Bagram airbase in 2010 and an October 2011 attack on a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) base in Panjshir (*Der Spiegel*, January 18, 2011; AP, October 16, 2011).

The IMU also played a key role in the Bannu prison break in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province that freed Adnan Rashid and nearly 400 other prisoners, including an estimated 200 Taliban fighters, on April 15, 2012. Rashid was in the Pakistani air force when in 2003 he was found guilty and placed on death row for plotting to assassinate then President Musharraf—a charge which Rashid confessed to after the escape.

A TTP Uzbek language video released in May 2012 shows the IMU preparing for the prison break and says that the plan

was devised after Rashid wrote a message seeking help to Abu Ibrahim al-Almani (a.k.a Yassin Chouka), a German of Moroccan descent who was designated a “global terrorist” by the United States for serving as a “fighter, recruiter, facilitator and propagandist” of the IMU. [1] According to the video, the operation to free Rashid was ordered by Hakimullah Mahsud, the overall leader of the TTP, and Waliur Rahman Mahsud, the leader of the TTP in South Waziristan (Online News [Islamabad], May 16, 2012).

In August 2012, a German-subtitled video released by the IMU’s JundAllah media wing featured Rashid speaking in Arabic and English about his time in prison. He described the night of the prison break, saying: “I saw my release in a dream about 20 days ago before the operation... I saw in the dream that some Uzbek mujahideen will come and will take me out of the prison.” Months later, on January 31, 2013, both the IMU’s JundAllah studio and the TTP’s Umar studio issued a “joint video message in support of the prisoners,” featuring Rashid, Abu Ibrahim al-Almani and Abdul Hakim, a Russian commander in the IMU. They declared that the IMU and the TTP have created a special unit called Ansar al-Asir (Supporters of Prisoners), whose aim is to free other imprisoned militants in Pakistan and target Pakistani intelligence agents, army personnel and prison staff (*The News* [Islamabad], February 7).

The integration of the IMU and the TTP has been displayed openly since September 2010, when the IMU’s JundAllah media agency posted a video online showing the successor of IMU founder Tahir Yuldash, the late Osman Adil, meeting with TTP leader Hakimullah Mahsud and his second-in-command, Waliur Rahman Mahsud (Furqon.com, January 15). These joint IMU-TTP videos are now commonplace. In December 2012 the IMU *mufti*, Abu Zar al-Burmi, even released a statement through the TTP’s Umar Studios in which he accused the West of hypocrisy for condemning the TTP’s attempted assassination of 13-year old Malala Yousufzal, while “having killed hundreds of innocent Pakistanis” themselves (As-ansar.com, December 27, 2012).

The IMU and TTP alliance in South Waziristan is likely to be strengthened by Maulvi Nazir’s death. For the TTP, this means that the IMU can continue to assist the TTP in attacking targets in Pakistan. For the soon to be departed U.S. forces in Afghanistan, this also means that the attacks from South Waziristan are likely to continue in an effort to hasten the withdrawal and portray the Taliban, the IMU and other allied militant groups as victors. For the IMU, Nazir’s elimination will help the movement secure the safe havens it needs in Pakistan’s tribal areas to pursue its long-term goal of establishing an Islamic State in Uzbekistan and the entire Central Asian region.

Note

1. U.S. Department of State, “Terrorist Designations of Yassin Chouka, Monir Chouka and Mevlut Kar,” January 26, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/182550.htm>.

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No End in Sight: Violence in the Niger Delta and Gulf of Guinea

Mark McNamee

A string of high-profile kidnapping incidents in recent months in combination with an increase and geographic expansion of pipeline attacks in the Lagos region (outside the traditional zone of militant activity in the Niger Delta) has raised questions about stability in Nigeria’s south and, by proxy, the effectiveness of the 2009 amnesty for militants affiliated with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). While no specific group is claiming responsibility for the attacks, the activity appears to be related to the same underlying socio-economic problems in the area that spurred the ascension of MEND, which at one point in the late 2000s shut down half of Nigeria’s over 2 million-barrels-per-day oil production. As the country receives some 80% of its earnings from oil production, the trends are particularly threatening as no substantive reason exists that any of this activity should abate in the near future. More realistically, such incidents are only likely to continue to worsen and expand.

Several incidents in February 2013 highlight this worsening trend. On February 7, pirates off the coast of Nigeria and Cameroon, in the Gulf of Guinea’s east, attacked a U.K.-flagged ship and kidnapped three sailors, all foreign nationals (AP, February 8). Days earlier, a French-owned diesel tanker was seized by Nigerian pirates in international waters in the Gulf of Guinea’s west, over 300 kilometers off of the coast of Côte d’Ivoire, from where the hijackers

sailed the tanker back into Nigerian waters to unload its fuel (*This Day* [Lagos], February 4). The following day, back in the traditional area of maritime criminal activity, two soldiers guarding a vessel operated by an oil company were killed by unknown gunmen in a shootout in Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta (AP, February 5). Thus, in the course of a week, suspected disgruntled actors from the Niger Delta demonstrated their increased ability to disrupt economic activity across the region, conducting operations not only in their own backyard, but as far east as the Cameroonian border and as far west as Côte d'Ivoire.

The Kidnapping Industry

Perhaps more worrying, a recent spate of kidnapping incidents involving wealthy Nigerians and foreigners (a favorite MEND pastime) highlights the increase in criminal activity in the region. On December 10, 2012, the wife of retired Brigadier General Oluwole Rotimi, a former Nigerian ambassador to the United States (2007-2009), was kidnapped in Ibadan, the capital of southwestern Oyo state (*Vanguard* [Lagos], December 12, 2012). Less than a week later, a Nigerian actress-turned-government official, Nkiru Sylvanus, was kidnapped by unknown gunmen in broad daylight in southeastern Imo State (*Vanguard*, December 17, 2012). On December 17, 2012, gunmen in Bayelsa State kidnapped four South Koreans and two Nigerians employed by a South Korean construction firm (AP, December 18, 2012). In early January 2013, a senior executive of an energy marketing company was abducted on the outskirts of Port Harcourt in Rivers State (PM News [Lagos], January 4, 2013).

In the most high-profile of these incidents, Kamene Okonjo, the mother of Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, was abducted from her home in Delta State on December 9, 2012. In response, soldiers arrested 63 people (including two policemen) during raids aimed at finding Okonjo in Delta State. Finance Minister Okonjo-Iweala is a former leading candidate to head the World Bank and is known in Nigeria for her campaign to end the controversial fuel subsidy program. Okonjo-Iweala blamed her mother's kidnapping on those angered by the government's decision to discontinue the controversial fuel subsidy program. The subsidy has benefited impoverished locals who enjoy artificially low prices on gas, but has also constituted a major drain on the government's resources, leading Okonjo-Iweala to end the program. However, since Nigeria lacks adequate refining capacity and must export its oil abroad to be refined, the subsidy has also been a cash cow for smugglers and corrupt politicians who import refined fuel at inflated prices and then collect on the subsidy (*This Day*, December 12, 2012). While it remains unknown whether Niger Delta

militants were directly involved in the kidnapping (Okonjo-Iweala blamed only the corrupt political elite of the ruling People's Democratic Party for her mother's abduction), the matter nonetheless demonstrates the growing instability of a region in which security and political officials are complicit in energy-related criminal activity, whether in alliance with administrators in Abuja, rebels in the Delta creeks, or both.

Bunkering in the Niger Delta

Pipeline attacks have likewise increased in frequency. While the 2009 amnesty helped end the general violence against the oil industry and its personnel in the Niger Delta, oil bunkering (oil theft by means of tapping pipelines) has reportedly doubled since the amnesty, costing the government some \$7 billion annually in lost revenue and another \$5 billion for pipeline repairs (Legaloil.com, April 28, 2012; *This Day*, January 14). [3] Oil thieves reportedly steal up to 20% (or some 400,000 barrels per day) of the nation's fuel in this dangerous practice (Reuters, January 15). Theft has become so pervasive that, in November 2012, Royal Dutch Shell, which produces roughly 40% of Nigeria's oil, shut down a pipeline in the Niger Delta after finding six theft points on its Imo River trunk line. The firm claimed that sabotage was responsible for 25 of the 26 spills on the Imo River in 2012, which released nearly 3,000 barrels into the river and other waterways, destroying large swathes of the local environment (AP, November 11, 2012).

In light of the deteriorating situation, Mutin Sunmonu, the managing director of Shell operations in Nigeria, has threatened to shut down the entire Nembe Creek Trunk Line, one of the most important in the delta. According to Sunmonu, the bunkering activities have overwhelmed the Joint Task Force (JTF), a multi-agency formation responsible for restoring security in areas of Nigeria plagued by militants:

The volume being stolen is the highest in the last three years; over 60,000 barrels per day from Shell alone. So, that for me is a great concern. The other important point for me is the fact that over time, this whole crime has gotten a lot more sophisticated and you could see that the perpetrators are now setting up barge building yards, they are setting up storage facilities, they are setting up tank farms for storing the crude, prior to shipping out. So, if you look at all of these, it is very clear to me that this is not just an act by desperate individuals trying to make a living. This certainly is a well-funded criminal activity, probably involving international syndicates. I really want to put it to you that we are in a crisis. We are in a crisis as a country because this is something which I worry is beyond the capacity of any individual

company or beyond the capacity of a country to solve. We really need concerted efforts nationally, locally and internationally to actually get this under control (*This Day*, March 4).

A recent string of events further illustrates the gravity of the issue. On September 5th, a pipeline in the city of Arepo, Ogun State, near Lagos, was vandalized by suspected Ijaw youth from the Niger Delta; at least 30 people were killed in the fire that ensued when the thieves were drawing fuel illegally from the pipeline. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) sent three engineers to repair the ruptured line, all of whom were murdered by Delta youth pilfering the fuel. Later, in early January 2013, after the line was fixed, the vandals caused another explosion while tapping into the line. On January 23, another bunkering fire and gun-battle with the thieves was reported on the Arepo line. With these events in mind, a leading Nigerian newspaper called the unceasing pipeline vandalism a “national threat” and further called the government “helpless” in finding a long-term solution (*Leadership* [Abuja], January 31).

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

Meanwhile, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has continued unabated.

- Some 62 attacks were recorded in the Gulf in 2012, including 10 hijackings and 207 kidnappings.
- While Nigeria accounted for 27 of these incidents, up from 10 in 2011, Togo saw an increase from 5 attacks in 2011 to 15 in 2012.
- Côte d’Ivoire, which had just one attack in 2011, suffered five in 2012, including the first-ever hijacking of a tanker off its shores in October 2012. [2]
- Armed hijackers from the Niger Delta also seized an oil tanker near Abidjan on January 16, 2013, stealing its 5,000 tons of oil (AP [Abidjan], January 21, 2013).
- Back in the Niger Delta, three oil supply vessels were attacked and two hijacked in December 2012 alone.
- In the first two weeks of February 2013, pirates attacked four vessels off Nigeria’s coast and one in the Delta, killing four and kidnapping eight.
- In a separate attack days later, robbers boarded a ship anchored at the Lagos port and stole its cargo (Reuters, February 19).

Much of the problem of piracy in the Gulf can be attributed to the absence of any significant coast guard fleet operating between Lagos and the Togo border, thus allowing pirates to act with impunity in the Bight of Benin and farther west (Thinkafricpress; March 20, 2012).

Corruption and Poverty Fuel Insecurity

Exacerbating the matter are continued reports from Abuja of extreme levels of corruption in the oil industry. Mismanagement and corruption costs billions of dollars annually, according to a leaked investigative report into Nigeria’s oil and gas industry by the Chairman of the Petroleum Revenue Task Force, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu. Among numerous other allegations, nearly \$30 billion was lost in the last decade in an apparent gas price-fixing scam involving government officials and foreign energy firms. Oil and gas companies owe the Nigerian treasury \$3 billion in royalties. Between 2005 and 2011, another \$566 million was owed by companies for the right to exploit an oil block, known as signature bonuses (*This Day*, October 25, 2012). In August 2012, the former World Bank Vice-President for Africa, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, said that an estimated \$400 billion of Nigeria’s oil revenue had been stolen or misspent since the country’s independence in 1960. She further claimed that while oil accounted for roughly 90% of the value of the nation’s exports, more than 80% of that money went to the pockets of the top 1% of the population (*This Day*, August 29, 2012). \$6.8 billion was drained from Nigeria between 2009 and 2012 in the fuel subsidy scam, which ultimately benefited corrupt officials in Abuja; in 2011 alone, the government paid 900 times more in the subsidy than was budgeted, suggesting the complicity of the finance ministry and the central bank in the arrangement (Reuters, April 19, 2012). Likewise, much evidence exists confirming the collusion of oil thieves in the creeks of the Delta with members of the JTF security force and top government officials (Legaloil.com, April 28, 2012).

At the other end of the spectrum, poverty in the Delta and across the country continues to be endemic. Despite general economic growth, the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics reported in February, 2012 that poverty had risen for the nation as a whole, with nearly 100 million people living on less than a dollar a day—a trend that is predicted to continue. Nearly 61% of Nigerians were living in “absolute poverty” in 2010, an increase from 54% in 2004; moreover, in 2010, more than 93% of respondents felt themselves to be poor compared to 75% six years earlier. In absolute terms, more than 112 million Nigerians were considered to be living in poverty in 2010, compared to 68.7 million in 2004. [3] Yet while these alarming trends have burgeoned, the government has made over \$1.6 trillion (as of 2009) since the discovery of oil in the country in 1956 (BBC, March 17, 2009). Adding insult to injury, President Goodluck Jonathan recently removed \$1 billion from the nation’s oil savings to distribute to Nigeria’s three dozen state governors in response to their demands (Reuters, January 30). With the lack of economic

opportunity in the Niger Delta and constant reminders of the high-level fleecing of the region's natural wealth by lawmakers, locals are left feeling they are not only forced into criminal activities such as bunkering or piracy, but morally justified in committing them.

The poverty, corruption, and violence in the region can be traced back to the general failure of the amnesty of 2009, which was ostensibly intended to resolve these issues. Legitimate questions can be raised as to its actual objectives. Locals have long felt that the government was never genuinely interested in tackling the complicated task of addressing the poverty and corruption in the region and energy industry, but instead sought only to diminish the violence in order to increase oil production (*Vanguard*, December 19, 2012). In this way, the amnesty can be said to have been at least a short-term success, as oil production has returned to over two million barrels per day since 2009. However, the long-term situation was left in question by the amnesty. The training program for ex-militants, one of the central components of the amnesty meant to address the enduring issue of youth unemployment, has been widely criticized for its corruption, selection processes and the failure of its graduates to find employment (*Daily Trust*, February 8; *Vanguard*, December 19, 2012).

Conclusion

As all forms of violence and criminal activity in relation to the energy industry have experienced an upward trajectory since the 2009 amnesty, there is little reason to suspect that the situation will improve itself naturally. Ordinary citizens in the Delta creeks repeatedly attest to the implausibility of achieving any material improvements in their livelihoods through licit means as compared to oil bunkering and other energy-related criminal activity (Reuters, January 15). As long as this remains the case and the government continues to fail to address the underlying grievances behind the lawlessness in the area, instability and illegal activity in the form of kidnappings, piracy and pipeline vandalism will degenerate further to a point eerily similar to that witnessed during the MEND insurgency only a few years ago.

Notes

1. International Energy Agency (IEA) Oil Monthly Report for October 2012, released November 13, 2012, <http://omrpublic.iea.org/omrarchive/13nov12full.pdf>.
2. The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) International Maritime Bureau (IMB) Global Piracy Report, January 16, 2013, <http://www.icc-ccs.org/news/836-piracy-falls-in-2012-but-seas-off-east-and-west-africa-remain->

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3. Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics, "The Nigeria Poverty Profile 2010 Report," released February 13, 2012, <http://www.nigerdeltabudget.org/National%20Bureau%20of%20Statistics%20Poverty%20Profile%20of%20Nigeria%202012%20%281%29.pdf>.

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