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SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY DISASTER IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: PART ONE – THE REBEL OFFENSIVE

Andrew McGregor

While international attention focused on efforts to deal with the fallout from Mali's military collapse and subsequent coup, a rebellion and coup in the Central African Republic (CAR) involving some of the main actors in the Mali crisis (including France and Chad) has garnered less attention, but may have equally important implications for the future of African security efforts, particularly those relying on the declining capabilities of the South African military (for the current state of the South African military, see *Terrorism Monitor Brief*, January 25).

In a series of skirmishes and battles from March 22 to 24 with a large force of Seleka rebels in the CAR capital of Bangui, a force of roughly 250 South African paratroopers and Special Forces personnel suffered 13 killed and 27 wounded, putting an effective end to the South African military presence in the CAR. The number of prisoners in Seleka hands has not been confirmed, but is rumored to be as high as 40 (SAPA, March 26). In a development similar to one of the grievances that led to last year's military coup in Mali, South African troops complained of being provided with insufficient ammunition, contributing to their losses in the fighting with rebels (SAPA, April 1). The South Africans' heaviest weapons appear to have been rocket launchers and 107mm mortars.

The rebel attacks followed the overthrow of President François Bozize and it is believed the rebels were angered by what they perceived as the South Africans' role in helping Bozize escape the capital. Bozize is reported to have fled to neighboring Cameroon with some members of the Presidential Guard, where he is awaiting news on which

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African country is prepared to shelter him. One of Seleka's main demands prior to their capture of Bangui was for the withdrawal of the South African troops, whom they regarded as "mercenaries" preserving the rule of a corrupt ruler.

A group of some 25 South African soldiers were present in Bangui under the terms of a 2007 Memorandum of Understanding in which the SA soldiers would engage in a capacity-building mission to help the CAR with the implementation of a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process designed to absorb former rebels into the Forces armées centrafricaines (FACA) (Sowetan [Johannesburg], March 26). Some of the South African troops in Bangui were deployed to protect what the South African National Defense Union (SANDU), which represents South Africa's troops, described as South African commercial interests in Bangui (*Johannesburg Times*, March 27).

Referring to reports that South African president Jacob Zuma ordered the deployment against the advice of Defense Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula and senior military staff who were instead urging the withdrawal of the small training mission in Bangui, Democratic Alliance parliamentary leader Lindiwe Mazibuko noted that the CAR was one of the most corrupt states in the world: "The key question that needs to be asked is: why did South Africa need to lose lives to defend this president?" (SAPA, March 27; Business Day Online [Johannesburg], March 26). The opposition has called for a "comprehensive investigation" into the debacle in Bangui, but the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has retorted that this is not the time to score "cheap political points" and has promised that South Africa "will not turn our backs when our neighboring countries need our assistance" (AFP, March 26; link2media [Johannesburg], March 27).

As the rebels made their final advance on Bangui, France sent an additional 350 troops to the CAR to strengthen the existing force of 250 soldiers (mostly Legionnaires) and protect the roughly 1200 French citizens in Bangui (AFP, March 26; RFI, March 24). The rebel offensive met little resistance from FACA forces and Chadian troops based north of the capital at Damara. Bozize called on Chad for military assistance in early December, but the Chadian troops sent to the CAR did not make a stand against the southwards advance of the Seleka rebels, which was only halted when a peace agreement (the Libreville Accords) was reached in January.

It was Bozize's failure to implement the accords, particularly the clause relating to integration of former rebels into the CAR military, which led to Seleka's final march on Bangui. A Seleka spokesman, Colonel Christian Djouma Narkovo, said military resistance collapsed quickly after the rebels

entered the capital. The Colonel added that the rebels had clashed three times with the South Africans: "We took their arms and even took prisoners. They laid down their arms and are now in their barracks." Colonel Narkovo also asked the French and Chadian forces in the capital to assist in bringing a halt to four days of looting and related chaos in Bangui that was fuelled by a power blackout and radio silence that began on March 23 (RFI, March 24). Three Chadian soldiers were reported to have been killed in the confused fighting in the capital (RFI, March 24). Two Indian nationals were killed by French troops guarding the Bangui airport when three cars approaching at high speed ignored warning shots (AFP, March 26). The fall of the Bozize government has also forced the suspension of the CAR-based hunt for Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony by the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) and U.S. Special Forces teams (Daily Monitor [Kampala], April 3; AFP, April 3)

Zuma's decision to send a force of 400 men to ostensibly guard a group of 25 military trainers who could have easily been otherwise withdrawn can only be interpreted as an effort to bolster the CAR regime. In the end, only 200 troops were actually sent, though they were not provided with air support, medical services, armored personnel carriers, logistical support or an evacuation plan. Since the mission was mounted on a unilateral basis, the South Africans had no-one else to call on if things went bad. Two days after the battle in Bangui the South African Air Force put its Saab Gripen fighter-jets on standby, but the warplanes were reported to lack the weapons needed to carry out an attack (SAPA, March 26). The remaining South African contingent in Bangui remains under French protection in a barracks near the Bangui Airport, where they await an extraction mission by the South African Air Force.

SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY DISASTER IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: PART TWO – THE POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC FALLOUT

Andrew McGregor

The motivation of South African president Jacob Zuma for the South African military deployment in Bangui is uncertain; as a South African business website points out, the Central African Republic (CAR) is outside South Africa's economic sphere of influence as it belongs to the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS - chaired by Chadian president Idriss Déby) rather than the South African

Development Community. Trade between the two nations is virtually non-existent though rumors of South African mining interests in the CAR persist (Business Day Online, March 26).

According to CAR opposition leader Martin Ziguéle, the head of the Movement for the Liberation of Central African People (MLCAP):

President Jacob Zuma was dragged along into this wasp's nest mostly by South African businessmen, who were naturally interested in mining activities in Central Africa. They truly dragged President Zuma into, it should be said, a trap. Because all countries in the sub-region had more intimate knowledge than South Africa on Central Africa's political realities and the conditions for a real exit from the crisis (RFI, March 26).

On March 28, a Johannesburg daily published the detailed results of an investigation into South African business connections with the CAR that began at the same time as the signing of the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding regarding defense, minerals and energy that called, in part, for the establishment of a South African military mission in Bangui. The report identified the involvement of a number of high-ranking ANC security and intelligence figures and ANC investment front Chancellor House in an effort to dominate the CAR's diamond-mining industry. The initiative was arranged by a well-known and controversial "fixer," Didier Pereira, a business partner of senior ANC security figures Paul Langa and Billy Masetlha, a former head of the South African National Intelligence Agency (NIA) (*Mail & Guardian* [Johannesburg], March 28). An ANC statement denied the allegations, claiming the *Mail & Guardian* was "pissing on the graves of gallant fighters who put their lives on the line in service of our country and our continent" (*Mail & Guardian* [Johannesburg], April 1).

It is possible that Bozize's growing ties with South Africa irritated Chadian president Idriss Déby, who had played a major role in installing Bozize as president and had provided his personal bodyguard force until they were withdrawn last December. Bozize has claimed that the attack on the South Africans was led by "Chadian special forces" (BBC, April 3). A force of roughly 400 Chadian troops forms part of the Mission de consolidation de la paix en République Centrafricaine (MICOPAX), an international force drawn from Chad, Gabon, Cameroon and the Congo (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, January 10, 2013). South African defense analyst Helmoed Römer Heitman has noted that "the attacking force was far different from the "rag tag" rebel force originally reported: Most of them in standardized

uniforms with proper webbing and with flak jackets, new AK47s and heavy weapons up to 23mm cannons. It was also clear that many were not from the CAR, some speaking with Chad accents and others having distinctly Arabic features" (*Sunday Independent*, March 31).

Shortly before his overthrow, Bozize suggested the rebellion was an externally-fuelled attempt to control the CAR's growing oil industry, alleging the involvement of maverick American oilman Jack Grynberg, who sued the CAR government after his exploration license in the northwestern CAR was revoked by Bozize (*Jeune Afrique*, October 14, 2011).

Seleka leader Michel Djotodia, a Russian trained economist who lived in the Soviet Union for 14 years, has denied rumors that Seleka was supported by Chad, Gabon or Congo-Brazzaville, saying that it was "simply misery that pushed us into taking up arms" (RFI, March 25). SANDU, the soldiers' union, has insisted that the South African government has a legal duty to arrange for an ICC indictment of Djotodia after the bodies of child soldiers were discovered among the large numbers of dead rebels after the battle in Bangui (SAPA, April 1) There are signs that Djotodia is settling in for the long-term as the CAR's ruler; though he has pledged to hold elections in 2016 (when Bozize's term would have expired), he has also noted: "I did not say that I would hand over power. I said that in three years I will organize free and transparent elections with everyone's support" (RFI, March 25).

Under heavy pressure from the media and political opposition, South African president Jacob Zuma reversed his intention to keep the battered South African force in the CAR and announced on April 4 that the South African military mission would be withdrawn (AFP, April 4). France may have played a role in the decision by preventing the deployment of a stronger South African force for fear it may lead to an attack on the Bangui airport or French interests in the city (*Sunday Independent*, March 31). The opposition had called for the withdrawal of a force that was "deployed to defend particular economic interests near the capital on behalf of a corrupt, authoritarian and unpopular government" (Business Day Online [Johannesburg], March 25).

South Africa has traditionally been one of the largest contributors to peacekeeping operations in Africa, with current SANDF deployments in Darfur and the Kivu region of the DRC. Though the South African military remains woefully underfunded, the ANC government continues to use it as an instrument of foreign policy and a means of

establishing regional influence. While the South African opposition is demanding the recall of the badly damaged and still unsupported military mission in Bangui, there are rumors that the South African military may now be planning a retaliation in order to defend the reputation and future safety of SANDF troops, potentially expanding a conflict whose true motives are known only to the senior South African leadership. The struggle for control of the CAR is further evidence of the growing military and political influence of Chad in Africa, working at times (as in Mali) in partnership with France. The current decline of South Africa and Nigeria as Africa's military powerhouses also suggests major shifts are ongoing in Africa's regional balance of power.

Ahrar al-Sham: A Profile of Northern Syria's al-Qaeda Surrogate

Chris Zambelis

The uprising against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's rule entered its third year in March. The process of disaggregating the political and armed currents that are struggling against the Ba'athist regime, however, remains an exercise in futility. Despite ardent efforts by the numerous opposition factions to portray an image of ideological moderation, the preponderance of evidence indicates that radical Islamists dominate the Syrian insurgency. Jabhat al-Nusra, a radical Salafist organization that is acting as al-Qaeda's surrogate in the conflict, has solidified itself as the most deadly insurgent faction fighting in Syria today. Yet other similarly motivated extremist formations are also making their presence felt. It is against this background that the activities of the Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of Greater Syria Brigades, hereafter referred to as Ahrar al-Sham), a radical Salafist faction operating largely in northern Syria, warrant a closer look.

Ahrar al-Sham has consolidated its influence in strategically important theaters across Syria, including portions of Syria's second city of Aleppo and its environs as well as vital supply and communication lines extending to Turkey (al-Monitor, January 13). It has also reportedly engaged Syrian security forces in some of the fiercest combat witnessed since the militarization of the uprising, including a series of fierce battles for control of a number of military air bases and civilian airports in January and February (*al-Safir* [Beirut], January 30; al-Jazeera [Doha], February 12). Perhaps most importantly, the instrumental role played by Ahrar al-Sham in the formation of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), an

association of eleven like minded Salafist militant factions that came together in common cause in December 2012, is emblematic of its growing influence. [1] Ahrar al-Sham is widely reputed to maintain a dominant presence within the SIF. [2] In another sign of its expanding authority, a number of fellow Salafist insurgent groups merged under Ahrar al-Sham's leadership structure to form the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (The Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham) in January 2013 (AFP, February 13).

Details surrounding the precise origins and leadership of Ahrar al-Sham remain murky. The group is believed to have organized in late 2011 and is reportedly led by Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi. While the *nisbah* portion of his name suggests that he hails from Hama, it has also been reported that he hails from Aleppo (al-Monitor, January 13). [3] Ahrar al-Sham's founding members are said to be former political prisoners who were incarcerated in the infamous Sednaya Prison located just outside of Damascus until they were granted amnesty in May 2011. While it welcomes foreign-born militants into its ranks, Ahrar al-Sham boasts of its mostly Syrian-born membership (al-Monitor, January 13; AFP, February 13). Ahrar al-Sham's influence is centered largely in Syria's northern governorates of Idlib, Aleppo and Raqqa and, to a lesser extent, the western-central governorates of Hama and Homs. An accurate estimate of its membership is difficult to discern. An alleged member of the group asserted that Ahrar al-Sham commands between 5000 and 6000 fighters in Aleppo governorate alone, a figure that is likely to be inflated for propaganda purposes (al-Monitor, January 13). Tens of regional-based detachments likely organized around local village, town and city networks operate under its auspices.

Ahrar al-Sham's track record to date is fraught with contradictions. From an ideological perspective, Ahrar al-Sham has declared its objective to transform Syria into its image of an Islamic state. Members of Ahrar al-Sham have stated that their conception of an Islamic state would protect religious minorities and be based on the premise that the majority of Syrians, who are Sunni Muslims, would choose to live in an Islamic society (*Daily Star* [Beirut], February 13; *al-Akhhbar* [Beirut] January 5). Yet its official discourse is replete with extremist themes and symbolism informed by its radical Salafist pedigree. Ahrar al-Sham's frequent resort to sectarian diatribes targeting Alawites and Shiite Muslims, both of whom are viewed by hardline Salafists as heretical, is often cited as a point of concern.

Ahrar al-Sham also draws ideological support from the likes of radical Salafist ideologues such as the Syrian exile cleric Shaykh Adnan al-Arouf, a leading advocate of the radical Salafist movement in Syria from his base in Saudi Arabia. The group also counts on the largesse of wealthy financiers based in the Persian Gulf and regional governments such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia that are funneling weapons to the front (*al-Akhhbar*, January 5; al-Monitor, January 13).

In a sign of things to come in a hypothetical post-al-Assad scenario, areas that have fallen under the control of Ahrar al-Sham and similarly minded militants, including some regions that were regarded as bastions of popular opposition to the Ba'athist regime, are reported to have witnessed the looting of local businesses and the unwelcome imposition of ultraconservative Islamic dictates on everyday social and civil life (*Radikal* [Istanbul], February 20; *al-Safir*, February 18).

In tactical and operational terms, Ahrar al-Sham appears to lean toward applying traditional insurgent-style guerilla attacks as opposed to the suicide bombings targeting symbols of the state and civilians executed by groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. It has claimed since its inception that it operates outside the purview of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the nominal umbrella movement that organized the first displays of violent opposition to the Ba'athist regime. At the same time, Ahrar al-Sham has been known to coordinate operations with insurgent factions affiliated with the FSA (*Daily Star*, February 13). Ahrar al-Sham has also coordinated a number of attacks with Jabhat al-Nusra and other radical Islamist factions (*al-Safir*, January 30).

As a complement to its battlefield activities, Ahrar al-Sham directs a prolific media campaign that provides further insight into its worldview and goals. A network of frequently updated websites and related online social media outlets serve as its primary information and propaganda wings. [4] Ahrar al-Sham issues official announcements that address pertinent political and operational matters as well as tributes glorifying its fallen fighters. Video footage of insurgent operations Ahrar al-Sham claims it launched against Syrian security forces and other targets are also disseminated on its virtual network. Many of these videos are subsequently rebroadcast on social media outlets sympathetic with the aims of the Syrian opposition. Ahrar al-Sham also operates an aid and relief arm in areas under its control.

The unique character of the scores of insurgent factions engaged in armed conflict against a Ba'athist regime that continues to show strong resilience will become increasingly germane to anticipating Syria's future course. In light of the prevailing radical Islamist current within the Syrian insurgency, Ahrar al-Sham appears to have established its credentials as a formidable force alongside groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the broader collection of FSA-associated factions. This holds especially true in the primary locations in which it operates. Ahrar al-Sham's involvement in the SIF also appears to indicate its aim to widen its reach among likeminded militants and their bases of popular support. While it has demonstrated its willingness to coordinate with a variety of different militant factions, Ahrar al-Sham's rising profile may eventually place it at odds with these same groups, thereby exacerbating the environment of rivalry and competition that has come to typify the Syrian opposition.

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Notes

1. The official videotaped announcement announcing the formation of the Syrian Islamic Front is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37GHb0tyCHY>. The official Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ pages of the Syrian Islamic Front are available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front>, https://twitter.com/S_IslamicFront, and <https://plus.google.com/110960948173047104747/about> respectively.
2. See Aron Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," Swedish Institute of International Affairs, (Occasional Papers No. 17, March 2013), p. 17.
3. *Nisbah* is a term added to an Arabic name that indicates the person's tribal affiliation or ancestry.
4. The official website representing Ahrar al-Sham is available at: <http://www.ahraralsham.com/>. The official Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter pages of Ahrar al-Sham are available at <https://www.facebook.com/Ahrar.Alsham.IS.M>, <http://www.youtube.com/user/SYRIslamicNetwork>, and <https://twitter.com/Ahraralsham> respectively.

Royal Army of Sulu Seeks to Restore the Sultanate in Malaysia's Sabah State

Nicholas A. Heras

The Royal Army of Sulu (RAS) is a militant organization with an estimated 200 to 400 members that seeks to reinstitute the control of the historic Sultanate of Sulu over Malaysia's Sabah State, in the northeastern region of the island of Borneo. RAS fighters claim fealty to the Manila-based Sultan Jamalul Kiram III, one of nine living claimants to the throne of Sulu. A majority of RAS fighters are members of the Tausug ethnic group, the majority ethnic group in the nearby Sulu Archipelago, an island chain belonging to the Philippines.

The Royal Army of Sulu (RAS) is a militant organization with an estimated 200 to 400 members that seeks to reinstitute the control of the historic Sultanate of Sulu over Malaysia's Sabah State, in the northeastern region of the island of Borneo. On February 9, RAS fighters landed in Sabah from the southern Philippine islands near the busy Malaysian port city of Lahad Datu (Borneo Insider, February 14). On March 1, fighting

between Malaysian security forces and the RAS broke out after several weeks of failed negotiations for the withdrawal of the RAS from Sabah. The fighting, which included air-strikes and mechanized raids by Malaysian security forces, is reported to have killed approximately 62 RAS fighters and ten members of the Malaysian soldiers (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* [Manila], March 17).

The Muslim Sultanate of Sulu was a small thalassocracy (a state based primarily on maritime territories such as islands and coastlines) dominated by the Tausug. Founded in the 15th century by the Arab explorer Sayyid Abu Bakr Abirin (later known as Paduka Mahasari Maulana al-Sultan Sharif al-Hashim), the Sultanate was based on the island of Jolo in the Sulu Sea southwest of the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. At its height, the Sultanate of Sulu controlled the islands of the Sulu Archipelago, Basilan Island, the southwestern peninsula of the Zamboanga region of the island of Mindanao and the northeastern region of the island of Borneo (currently Malaysia's Sabah State).

In 1878, the Sultanate of Sulu either ceded or leased (there is a dispute over the exact translation of the agreement) control of its portion of northern Borneo to the British Northern Borneo Company for a yearly sum of money. The British claim to North Borneo was subsequently recognized by the Spanish colonial government in the Philippines, and in 1885 the Spanish relinquished their claim and the Sultan of Sulu's claim to sovereignty over northern Borneo. The Sultanate of Sulu disregarded this Spanish action and has maintained its claim to Sabah to the present day. In 1946, the British made Sabah a crown colony.

Northern Borneo was incorporated into Malaysia upon Malaysia's independence from Great Britain in 1963. Sabah joined the federation government of Malaysia on the condition that it was an autonomous state with powers of self-determination. The government of the Philippines still considers northeastern Borneo as part of the Philippines and the Malaysian government pays the descendants of the Sultanate of Sulu \$1,700 a year as either rent or purchase of Sabah State, according to the interpretation of the 1878 agreement (Reuters, March 3). Sabah is estimated to have 11 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 1.5 billion barrels of petroleum in both on and offshore reserves, equaling 25 percent and 12 percent of the Malaysia's total natural gas and petroleum reserves (Reuters, November 15, 2011).

Sultan Jamalul III stated that the motivation for the invasion was his followers' dissatisfaction with being left out of peace talks between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF, the largest and most powerful

Muslim political movement in the southern Philippines), which arrived at a draft agreement in October 2012 with Malaysia acting as a mediatory. Sultan Jamalul III stated that it was his perception that the Philippine government was ignoring him and unwilling to negotiate with Malaysia for reinstatement of the Sultanate in Sabah (*Philippine Star* [Manila], March 7).

RAS fighters are reported to be under the field command of Sultan Jamalul III's brother and heir designate, Raja Muda Agbimuddin Kiram (*Philippine Star* [Manila], February 23). Malaysian security forces report that RAS fighters are utilizing nothing more powerful than assault rifles. It is believed that the RAS invaded Sabah by utilizing small speed boats operated from the southern Philippines island of Tawi-Tawi before infiltrating the region by exploiting family and social ties with Filipino Tausug immigrants (*Daily Express* [Kota Kinabalu], February 26).

Sabah has an estimated 800,000 Filipino immigrants who migrated to the state due to its proximity, common ethnic ties and Sabah's expanding palm oil and construction industry. A significant number of Filipino immigrants in Sabah are reported to have received Malaysian citizenship under Malaysia's former prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, in exchange for Filipino political support for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. The current Malaysian government has begun the process of revoking the Malaysian citizenship of Filipino migrants who received it during Prime Minister Mohammad's government (*Manila Times*, March 11). Since the outbreak of the conflict in Sabah, Malaysian security forces have reportedly been intimidating and arresting Filipino immigrants in Sabah forcing thousands of Filipinos to return to the Sulu Archipelago, prompting official condemnation from the Philippine government (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* [Manila], March 11).

As a result of the intensity of the Malaysian military's campaign against the RAS, Sultan Jamalul III ordered RAS fighters to remain in Sabah and conduct guerilla warfare (*The Philippine Star* [Manila], March 18). Malaysian security forces predict that RAS fighters will create "pockets of resistance," in rural villages in and around the Lahad Datu region and will be supported in this effort by sympathetic Suluk-Tausug villagers native to Sabah (*Daily Tribune* [Manila], March 19).

Politics of ethnic identity and intra-Moro political rivalries are also complicating factors in the conflict over Sabah. Factions of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a MILF rival and one of the most powerful political and military organizations in the Muslim-majority Autonomous

Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), are reported to be closely tied to the RAS invasion of Sabah. The MILF has been less militant in its rhetoric in support of the RAS than the Nur Misuari faction of the MNLF and supports a negotiated settlement between the Malaysian government and the RAS (*Solar News* [Manila], February 19). Misuari, the founder of the MNLF and leader what is reported to be its most powerful faction, recently accused the MILF of being an “instrument of Malaysian colonialism” (al-Jazeera, March 18).

Misuari and Muhajab Hashim, the head of the Islamic Command Council (ICC - the MNLF’s military wing), have stated that ICC members are “adherents” and “followers” of the Sultan, with the former adding that Sabah is “sacred land” for the Tausug (*Philippine Star* [Manila], March 7; al-Jazeera, March 18). The MNLF draws much of its membership from the Sulu Archipelago (*Daily Tribune* [Manila], March 6).

All factions of the MNLF have publicly stated their support for a negotiated peace between the RAS and the Malaysian government. Former and current fighters of the MNLF are also believed to be seeking to fight alongside the RAS in growing numbers (ABS-CBN News [Manila], March 5). Haji Musa Abdullah, a former MNLF commander, is reported to be the second most powerful officer in the RAS and the strategist who planned the Sabah invasion (*The Star* [Petaling Jaya], March 14).

Misuari is reported to have boasted to a Filipino general that the MNLF retained hundreds of fighters in Sabah and could control it in a couple of hours (Malaysia Today, March 13). MNLF leaders close to Misuari state that the MNLF maintained small arms caches throughout Sabah, a legacy of training the MNLF is alleged to have received from Malaysian security forces during the MNLF’s armed conflict with the Philippine government (1970-1996). MNLF fighters who lived in Sabah before the start of the fighting between the RAS and the Malaysian military are also stated to be recruiting local Filipino Tausug immigrants and native Suluk-Tausug to fight with the RAS (*Manila Bulletin*, March 5).

The conflict in Sabah raises questions over the possibility of competing foreign agendas between the government of the Philippines, Malaysia, the MILF and the MNLF and its political allies in the autonomous Bangsamoro region near Sabah. The MNLF’s ongoing operations against Abu Sayyaf Group in the Sulu islands and its support for the Royal Army of Sulu indicate that the MNLF is positioning itself to be an assertive force against its intra-Moro enemies and a source of support for its Moro allies in the Bangsamoro region,

particularly in the restive Sulu island chains. The possibility of conflict between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and members of those movements seeking to fight in Sabah, particularly the MNLF, could add yet another complication to the already tenuous relations between the emerging Bangsamoro region (including Sabah) and the government of the Philippines.

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Private Approval, Public Condemnation: Drone Warfare’s Implications for Pakistani Sovereignty

Brian Glyn Williams

The latest contribution to the debate over the U.S. drone campaign in Pakistan came from Ben Emmerson, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Counter Terrorism and Human Rights after three days of meetings with Pakistani officials in mid-March. When the meetings were over Emmerson’s office issued the following statement, the UN’s loudest condemnation of the CIA’s drone assassination campaign in Pakistan to date:

[Pakistan] does not consent to the use of drones by the United States on its territory and it considers this to be a violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a matter of international law the U.S. drone campaign in Pakistan is therefore being conducted without the consent of the elected representatives of the people, or the legitimate government of the state. It involves the use of force on the territory of another State without its consent and is therefore a violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty. Pakistan has called on the U.S. to cease its campaign immediately. [1]

A cursory read of the statement presents a very stark picture of a sovereign nation being invaded by U.S. drones presumably flown from Coalition-controlled Afghanistan. Pakistani officials, it can be inferred, are united in their strong opposition to these violations of their territorial sovereignty. However, this simple black and white image of a bullying

American superpower violating international law fails to capture the complexities of America's drone campaign in Pakistan or its relations with Islamabad. Far from being a simple case of aggression, the Pakistanis have covertly supported the drone campaign since its inception in 2004. An exploration of the true nature of U.S.-Pakistani relations in regards to the murky drone campaign reveals a grey world of Pakistan-based CIA drones, joint Pakistani-American counter terrorism operations and official (but private) Pakistani government and military support for the drone campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The Drone War and Secret Pakistani Support

The first CIA drone assassination in Pakistan was of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Nek Muhammad in 2004. Muhammad and his followers had become the dominant force in the South Waziristan tribal agency in the previous three years. Having defeated the Pakistani army on several occasions, his followers then overturned Pakistan's laws and strictly enforced Shari'a in what became known as "Talibanistan." Muhammad was clearly a threat to Pakistan's sovereignty and President Musharraf subsequently admitted that he allowed the United States to carry out drone surveillance inside Pakistan's territory (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], December 3, 2010). While Musharraf later stated that he did not give the United States permission to use the drones to kill militants like Muhammad, one Pakistani daily called his retroactive disavowal of the campaign "greatly suspect" (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], December 23, 2010).

In 2008 Musharraf was replaced as president by Asif Ali Zardari, whose wife, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, had been killed by a suspected Taliban suicide bomber. Musharraf returned to Pakistan on March 24 after five years of self-exile, apparently with a revisionist view of the drone issue more in line with the government's official position: "No country is allowed to violate another's sovereignty like the U.S. did in this case. Pakistan's authority was harmed, how can I approve of such a thing?... I'm against these drone wars. It's also an infringement on our sovereignty. If the U.S. wants to fight terrorists with drones, they should provide us with the corresponding technology so that we can carry out that fight" (Interview with Spiegel Online, March 26).

Zardari, however, seemed to be willing to stand by the Americans and the war on the terrorists who threatened his state, even if it cost him some popularity among his own people. Zardari referred to the Taliban as a "cancerous" threat to Pakistan and told Washington he would "take the heat" if the United States launched a cross-border raid to get a high value target like Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri (*Dawn* [Karachi], May 26, 2011). In that year the

drone war stepped up drastically from one or two strikes a year to 36 strikes.

Subsequently, however, Zardari claimed that the drone strikes were "counter-productive and violated Pakistan's sovereignty" (*The Nation* [Islamabad], March 26). This perfunctory statement was obviously meant to garner the support of Pakistanis who strongly disliked the idea of a foreign power operating with impunity on their own soil, killing what many believe are almost exclusively innocent Pakistani citizens. Many Pakistani voters wanted their leaders to publicly stand up to the American "invaders." However, Zardari was said to have secretly told the Americans: "Kill the seniors. Collateral damage worries you Americans. It does not worry me." [2] Zardari also told a group of Pakistani reporters in Lahore "There are no differences between Pakistan and the U.S. over any issue, including drone attacks." (*Daily Times* [Lahore], January 21, 2010). He also made a plea for the United States to "give me the drones so my forces can take out the militants." In that way, Zardari suggested, "we cannot be criticized by the media or anyone else for actions our army takes to protect our sovereignty." (*Dawn* [Karachi], May 20, 2011).

Zardari also seemed to appreciate the fact that the drone attacks were helping his country avoid military casualties they would have sustained had they directly attacked the terrorists' lairs in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). A U.S. diplomatic cable from the Islamabad embassy related that after a drone strike in the tribal region that killed 60 militants, "Zardari reported that his military aide believed a Pakistani operation to take out this site would have resulted in the deaths of over 60 Pakistani soldiers." [3]

Similarly, a spokesperson for Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) declared: "There is a segment in the country who support the drone attacks and they feel that drone attacks have been helpful in eliminating many of the militants" (CNN, December 22, 2010). One Pakistani military officer told the AFP news service: "The Pakistani army supports drone strikes because they are efficient for eliminating TTP people... and give it a good reason not to start a dangerous offensive in North Waziristan" (AFP, October 10, 2011). Pakistan's ambassador to the United States further stated: "Pakistan has never said that we do not like the elimination of terrorists through predator drones" (*Dawn* [Karachi], July 18, 2010).

Wikileaks cables from 2009/2010 show that Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani similarly opined in private: "I don't care if they do it as long as they get the right people. We'll protest in the National Assembly and then ignore it."

[4] General Shah Shuja Pasha summed up his view of the Taliban/al-Qaeda when he said: “We would obviously like to fix these rogues. They are killing our own people and are certainly not the friends of this country.” [5] In addition, General Ashfaq Parvaz Kayani, chief-of-staff of the Pakistani military, secretly asked the United States for “continuous Predator coverage of the conflict area” during his forces’ campaigns against the Taliban in FATA (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], May 21, 2011). This request was answered in the affirmative during Pakistani operations in South Waziristan.

In his book *The Most Dangerous Place. Pakistan’s Lawless Frontier*, Pakistani journalist Imtiaz Gul wrote of the disconnect between what the Pakistani leadership secretly wanted, and their public stance:

Most Pakistanis, including members of the media and mainstream political leaders, view the attacks as a violation of their national sovereignty. But privately, even top generals support drone strikes. In a recent meeting with a handful of Pakistani journalists, a very senior general told us, “As long as they take out the guys who are [a] threat to us all, why crib about it?” Leading government officials, including Prime Minister Gilani, will agree, even if publicly they condemn the drone strikes. [6]

A recent analysis by a former Pakistan Army brigadier, A.R. Jerral, suggested that it was worth recalling that “the former Chief of Air Staff had publicly stated that the Pakistan Air Force had the capability to intercept and destroy the drones provided the government ordered it to do so. But the government of Pakistan never tasked it for this. This too implies that there was tacit approval and consent for the drone attacks that killed innocent Pakistani nationals.” The brigadier added, however, that “if these attacks were without consent, it was an act of war and those in the government failed to protect the lives of the citizens as well as national sovereignty” (*The Nation* [Islamabad], March 26).

Even as the Pakistani government summoned U.S. ambassador Anne Patterson to be publicly warned in “strong” terms that Pakistan had had enough of the drone strikes, these same Pakistani leaders secretly condoned the use of drones. Behind closed doors many of Pakistan’s leaders seemed to have believed that the targeted assassinations of terrorists were in their country’s best interests despite their public pronouncements to the contrary.

The Secret Drone Base in Pakistan

Senator Dianne Feinstein, Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee exposed the Pakistani government’s double game on February 12, 2009 when, when she claimed, “As I understand it, these [drones] are flown out of a Pakistani base” (*Dawn* [Karachi], February 14, 2009). In response, the Pakistani embassy in Washington issued an announcement which stated Feinstein’s statement was “an off the cuff remark and not a revelation as some media reports have made it out to be. There are no foreign bases in Pakistan” (Associated Press of Pakistan, February 15, 2009). Pakistani Defense Minister Ahmad Mukhtar similarly rebutted Feinstein’s incautious remark and stated, “We do have the facilities from where they can fly, but [U.S. drones] are not being flown from Pakistani territory. They are being flown from Afghanistan... I do not know on what she based all this” (*Daily Times* [Lahore], February 14, 2009).

But the truth came out five days later when *The Times* published an article that featured satellite images obtained from Google Earth that clearly showed Predator drones on a runway in Shamsi, a base located in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan (*The Times* [London], February 17, 2009).

An unnamed Pakistani security official similarly told Reuters that the drone campaign was a “joint operation” between Pakistan and the United States. This source suggested that the two countries had inaugurated a new level of understanding and that Pakistani “spotters” were used to track the terrorists. The source further said “Our working relationship is a bit different from our political relationship. It’s more productive.” He then provided for the first time details of how the Pakistanis work with the CIA in targeting terrorists for drones: “We run a network of human intelligence sources. Separately, we monitor their cell and satellite phones. Thirdly, we run joint monitoring operations with our U.S. and UK friends... al-Qaeda is our top priority.” The source also explained that “Pakistani and U.S. intelligence officers, using their own sources, hash out a joint ‘priority of targets lists’ in regular face-to-face meetings” (Reuters, January 22, 2010).

Much of Pakistan’s Urdu and English language press used the release of the UN rapporteur’s report to vent popular frustration with civilian losses due to drone strikes and the alleged violations of Pakistani sovereignty:

- “Pakistan should forcefully repeat its demand for an end to the drone strikes. It is to be hoped that the world community will support Pakistan. No one can argue against the need for action against the terrorists;

likewise, there is absolutely no room for the killing of innocent people in today's civilized world" (*Dunya* [Quetta], March 17).

- "Whatever the United States is doing in the form of drone strikes is more savage than terrorism and there is need for a new term—'dronism'—for this. It is hoped that this term will be considered more horrific than terrorism, because these strike tear human bodies into pieces in such a way that they cannot be identified" (*Aushaf* [Islamabad], March 17).
- "The drone attacks in Pakistan are illegal because these are in violation of sovereignty of a state" (*Express* [Islamabad], March 17).
- "Pakistan's parliament has adopted resolutions against drone strikes twice, while the All Parties' Conference has also adopted a resolution against these attacks and demanded that the UN have them stopped. It needs no clarification that no independent, sovereign country can see such trampling of its sovereignty nor give permission for it" (*Jang* [Rawalpindi], March 17).
- "Contrary to what the U.S. officials have been leaking to the media off and on, the UN official has categorically stated that drones do not have the consent of the Pakistan Government. This should leave no doubt in minds of the international public opinion that drones are nothing but an act of aggression against a sovereign country" (*Pakistan Observer* [Islamabad], March 17).

Not all Pakistanis are unified in their fury at the drones for the apparent violation of their country's sovereignty. Syed Alam Mashud, a Peshawar-based political activist from Waziristan, said "To those people sitting in the drawing rooms of Islamabad talking about the sovereignty of Pakistan, we say, "What about when [al-Qaeda] Arabs or Uzbeks occupy your village? What about sovereignty then? We compare the drones with *ababeel*—the swallows tasked by God in the Koran to smite an army with rocks" (*The Times* [London], January 2, 2010).

Conclusion

Many people in Pakistan have accepted the simple narrative that was put forth by the UN Special Rapporteur on Counter Terrorism and Human Rights. According to the narrative, that the CIA's drones are violating Pakistan's sovereignty, however, it does not stand up to scrutiny. There are certain elements in the Pakistani government and military who see the drone strikes as beneficial in their country's war against Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists who have killed thousands of Pakistani citizens. While one can forgive the Pakistani government for playing a double game to protect itself from the criticism of its citizens, many of whom hold anti-

American sentiments, it seems strange that a UN official was not able to provide a more nuanced statement that captures the actual nature of Pakistan's convoluted relationship with the Americans. Axiomatic statements such as that made by the UN's rapporteur are not useful in assessing the real impact of the drone strikes in helping the Pakistanis fight a determined Taliban/al-Qaeda enemy, which is the real threat to the country's sovereignty.

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Notes

1. "Pakistan: Statement by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism." *Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights*, Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13148&LangID=E>
2. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, Simon and Schuster. New York, 2010, p.26.
3. Wikileaks: U.S. Embassy Cable 09ISLAMABAD1123, May 26, 2009.
4. Wikileaks: U.S. Embassy Cable Islamabad 002449, October 9, 2009.
5. Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place. Pakistan's Lawless Frontier*, Viking, New York, 2009, p.206.
6. *Ibid*, pp. 216-17.