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Libyan security personnel gather outside the French embassy in Tripoli following a car bomb blast last week

ISLAMIST VIOLENCE IN TRIPOLI DEFIES EFFORTS TO RESTORE SECURITY IN LIBYA

Andrew McGregor

An estimated 80% of the two-story French Embassy in the suburban al-Andlus neighborhood of Tripoli was destroyed by a car bomb on the morning of April 23. The massive blast also damaged four neighboring houses. Remarkably, only two French gendarmes were injured in the 7 AM attack, which seemed designed to avoid mass casualties amongst the hundreds of Libyans who assemble outside the embassy later in the morning to seek French visas. No group has claimed responsibility, though the Interior Ministry and Foreign Ministry have both typically blamed Qaddafi loyalists rather than radical Islamists for the bombing (*Le Monde*, April 26; Xinhua, April 23).

The attack may actually have been connected to French operations against Islamist militants in northern Mali. The bombing came one day after France’s decision to extend its military mission in Mali and coincided with a visit to Tripoli by Jacques Myard, chairman of the National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs Committee (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 24). Islamists in Tripoli and Benghazi expressed their anger with the French intervention in January protests. Since then, there have been concerns in Libya that continued inability to prevent attacks on foreign nationals and facilities in Tripoli and elsewhere in Libya might invite further foreign military intervention (*al-Watan* [Tripoli], April 24; February Press [Tripoli], February 24).

Libyan officials still see the hand of Qaddafi loyalists behind much of the insecurity in Libya. According to Libyan Defense Minister Muhammad al-Barghathi: “There are enemies inside Libya from the former regime who are still active in undermining the internal situation and influencing some leaders.” In light of the bombing and earlier

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attacks on the Italian ambassador in January and the fatal assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in September, Libyan Foreign Minister Muhammad Abd al-Aziz concedes the existence of radical Islamists in Libya, but believes “The solution is to have a dialogue with them and to pursue a policy of integration with the families. To use force is not the right approach within the context of the national reconciliation necessary to rebuild Libya” (*Le Monde*, April 26).

Car-jackings and gunfights between militias have become daily occurrences in Tripoli, which was known for its safety until recently. Libya’s militias are also opposing the development of a free press, a crucial step in the development of a democratic society. Beatings, threats and illegal detentions have all been used to silence attempts to report on militia activities in Tripoli (Reuters, May 1). In recent days the Libyan government has come under siege from the militias and even its own police, making the establishment of a functioning government nearly impossible:

- On April 28, armed men and vehicles surrounded the Foreign Ministry in a continuing blockade to demand the dismissal of Ministry employees who worked for the Qaddafi regime.
- On April 29, former rebels briefly occupied the Finance Ministry.
- On April 29 and 30, policemen took over the Interior Ministry twice to demand raises and promotions.
- On April 30, 20 to 30 gunmen pulled up in front of the Justice Ministry in trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns and occupied the building, sending Ministry workers fleeing. The gunmen were angered by remarks made by the Justice Minister regarding illegal prisons run by the militias (AFP, May 1; BBC April 30).

As well as arms, much of the Qaddafi regime’s internal surveillance equipment has fallen into the hands of various Libyan militias. According to Interior Minister Ashur Shuwayil, these militias are now using this equipment to monitor senior members of the Libyan government, the General National Congress (parliament) and members of the media (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 24). Inside Libya, there is a debate over whether the intimidation practiced by the militias is a useful stimulus to moving the revolution forward or crass manipulation of the political process by politicians looking to expel potential opponents from the government (BBC, April 30).

Libya’s Defense Minister says the government has sought help

from Canada, Australia, India, Pakistan, Jordan and Egypt in creating a new professional army to replace the militias. Of these nations, Egypt has been most receptive to Libya’s request, despite experiencing its own breakdown in internal security (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 24). Libya’s Defense Ministry is seeking to obtain modern, sophisticated weaponry, but must wait another year for UN restrictions on arms sales to Libya to expire. Describing the army of the Qaddafi regime as “a joke,” Defense Minister al-Barghathi maintains that Libya is trying to restore security and is “seeking to build an army whose number is proportionate with the population despite Libya’s vast territory, but in ways that lead to units that are small in size but professional and equipped with special weapons—and in which aircraft are used in particular” (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 24).

Libyan armed forces chief-of-staff Major General Yusuf al-Mangush continues to face opposition from officers of the new national army, especially in Benghazi and other eastern regions. Though government officials continue to express confidence in al-Mangush, a recent conference in al-Burayqah saw army officers, militia leaders and civilian leaders call for the chief-of-staff’s immediate dismissal and an investigation into missing funds issued to the Libyan Army’s General Staff (*al-Watan* [Tripoli], April 23). One of the groups represented at the conference was composed of current and former army officers who have organized under the name “Free Libyan Army Officers Assemblage.” The group has called for the elimination of the Libyan Army’s General Staff and its replacement with an independent body of qualified personnel (*al-Hurrah* [Tripoli], April 20).

At some point, the new government will need to assert its authority if it wishes to end armed attempts to direct the government’s direction. For now, however, the government remains outmanned and outgunned, lacking the firepower advantage normally expected with government militaries. With UN Chapter VII restrictions on arms sales to Libya still in effect for another year, Libya’s government will have to seek other means of restraining the militias, which in at least one sense could be viewed as a favorable development, as an argument could be made that shipping even more arms to Libya might contribute little to solving the nation’s many problems.

DISSENSION AND DESERTIONS BEGIN TO PLAGUE UGANDA'S MILITARY

Andrew McGregor

Uganda's military is one of the most active in Africa, with ongoing operations in Somalia, the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) reflecting Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's willingness to use his nation's military to establish Uganda as a regional power in east Africa. Internally, the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) is still engaged in operations against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in western Uganda (for the ADF, see *Terrorism Monitor*, December 5, 2007). Last year, the UPDF threatened to intervene militarily in South Sudan if Khartoum attacked the new nation (*Sudan Tribune*, April 20, 2013). UPDF operations in Somalia and the CAR have the active support of the U.S. Defense Department.

In recent months, over 400 UPDF servicemen have deserted, often with their arms. Surprisingly, 37 of the deserters were members of the elite Special Forces Command (SFC). According to an investigation carried out by a Kampala daily, the deserters had been part of a larger SFC group assigned to fell trees and clear bush around President Museveni's ranch in Mpigi district. The elite troops resented being deployed in heavy labor tasks with no apparent military purpose, though the army maintains the men were used to clear "an observation zone to spot enemies" (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], April 25). Desertion has rarely been a problem in the SFC in the past as SFC members are better trained and better paid than other UPDF commands and receive an extra food allowance. Many of the deserters from other units appear to come from the northern and eastern parts of Uganda, reflecting complaints of discrimination in the UPDF against recruits from certain geographical regions. Uganda's Internal Security Organization (ISO) is reported to be running intensive search operations in pursuit of the deserters that have already resulted in over 100 arrests (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], April 30).

Deserters are thought to have been among those responsible for a March 4 attack on the Mbuya army barracks that appears to have been designed to seize enough weapons to arm a criminal group or rebel movement. Though the attack was repulsed after a firefight, there are concerns the attackers may have had support from active service members at the Mbuya base (*New Vision* [Kampala], March 5; *Daily Monitor* [Kampala], March 6; *Observer Online* [Kampala], March 19). Colonel Felix Kulayigye, who was appointed Chief Political Commissar of the UPDF in March, says that the problem is that many recruits are joining the army to

make money rather than serve the nation: "There has been a misunderstanding that there is a lot of money in the army... A job seeker is simply a wage seeker, and if the wage is not satisfactory to their expectations, they run away" (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], April 25).

A lively debate has opened up in Uganda regarding the merits of the SFC commander, Brigadier Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who also happens to be the first son of President Museveni. Muhoozi received education and training at Sandhurst, Fort Leavenworth and the U.S. General Staff College but his rapid rise through the ranks of the UPDF has prompted questions surrounding political interference in the promotion process. The president's son took only one year to rise from second lieutenant in 2000 to major in 2001. Last August, Muhoozi was promoted to Brigadier ahead of many senior colonels and given command of the SFC. According to Minister of Defense Dr. Crispus Kiyonga, Muhoozi was "promoted on merit because he has trained and is very hard-working" (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], March 1). After questions were raised about the appointment by opposition politician and former UPDF colonel Dr. Kizza Besigye, the president took the extraordinary step of responding to charges of nepotism by penning a lengthy refutation published in a Kampala daily (*Saturday Monitor* [Kampala], February 17). As SFC leader, Brigadier Muhoozi commands Uganda's most capable troops, organized in 11 battalions with a total of 10,000 soldiers tasked with protecting the president, guarding oil infrastructure and carrying out special military operations as required. There is reason to believe that Muhoozi's military career is intended as a stepping stone to his eventual succession of his father as Ugandan president.

Uganda's Special Forces have been effective in carrying out special missions of the type recently described by the commander of Uganda's African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) contingent, Brigadier Michael Ondoga: "You may have special scenarios like an enemy hiding somewhere in a narrow place and he can only be dealt with in a special way, say at night by surprising him. These are the kind of special operations we are talking about. Those special scenarios that need night visual equipment and high speed to execute and return. They also carry out night operations in built up areas. They are well trained and have that capability. They can move in quickly and carry out surgical operations and come out" (*Ugandan News*, March 23).

Ugandan/AMISOM operations in Somalia have been complicated by Ethiopia's March decision to withdraw its roughly 8,000-man force from Somalia. Ethiopian troops entered western regions of Somalia in November 2011, but have remained outside the AMISOM command structure.

Al-Shabaab fighters are moving to re-occupy areas from which they were once expelled by the Ethiopian forces (AFP, April 26).

Ugandan police do not believe the Islamist al-Shabaab has lost its ability to carry out terrorist operations and have consequently issued a public alert warning information has been received of potential terrorist attacks by the Somali Islamists (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], April 27). There are currently over 6,000 Ugandan soldiers deployed in Somalia.

However, the UPDF is planning a similar withdrawal from joint operations in the Central African Republic designed to eliminate the decades-long threat posed by Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Working alongside elements from the U.S. Special Forces, Ugandan military operations in the CAR have greatly reduced the number of killings and abductions carried out by the LRA, but Kony remains at large and is expected to exploit the Ugandan withdrawal to resume operations in the region (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], April 4). Service in the CAR campaign is disliked by many of the Ugandan troops deployed there and is thought to be behind a number of the recent desertions.

The transformation of the UPDF from a guerrilla force to a national army has not eased a tendency for some officers to be outspoken on political matters, despite the implications for civil-military relations. Many serving and retired officers recently welcomed the verdict of a General Court Martial in the case of former military intelligence chief Brigadier Henry Tumukunde. The Brigadier was ordered released with a "serious reprimand" after being arrested in 2005 following remarks he made in a 2005 radio interview questioning Museveni's leadership and the decision to abolish term limits on the presidency. Former internal security deputy director and current opposition politician Major John Kazoora suggested Tumukunde's prosecution and other government moves to stifle dissent were proof that "The country has gone full cycle into dictatorship. Museveni has muzzled parliament and does not want divergent views" (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], April 19; April 18).

Uganda's alliance with the United States and the West and the role of the UPDF in establishing regional security have helped mute Western criticism of election irregularities and authoritarian tendencies in the Museveni government. Nonetheless, the government will find it hard to avoid the internal repercussions of these policies. With the UPDF providing the backbone of the Museveni regime, any signs of dissent within that force are bound to have political importance in Kampala, where opposition figures are eager to use any lever to dislodge the president's grip on power.

War Crimes Trials in Bangladesh Create Opening for Islamist Militants

Animesh Roul

Bangladesh, the world's fourth largest Muslim country, has recently experienced an intense cycle of massive protest rallies marked by violent confrontations between moderate secularists and Islamic radical forces. The spark for these religious and political confrontations has been the ongoing trials for war-crimes committed by Islamist groups during and just after 1971's Operation Searchlight, the Pakistani campaign that preceded the Bangladesh Liberation War. At the time, Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan and was part of a larger but geographically-divided Muslim state that included the more developed territory of West Pakistan (now the Islamic Republic of Pakistan). Dissatisfaction in East Pakistan with the leadership of Pakistani President Yahya Khan over the united territories led to a 1971 revolt that was brutally suppressed by the Pakistani military and local militias through the killing of hundreds of thousands of Bengalis and Hindus (exact figures are disputed). These events led to a general war between Pakistan and India (which supported the Bengali separatist movement) and the eventual independence of Bangladesh.

On February 5, a popular protest in the capital of Dhaka against verdicts issued in the ongoing war crimes trials and growing Islamic extremism in Bangladesh was led by a few online social media activists and bloggers under the banner of the Gano-Jagarana Mancha (Mass-Awakening Forum). The main impetus was the sentencing of senior Jamaat leader Abdul Kadeer Mollah (accused of killing 344 people) to life imprisonment rather than the widely-expected death penalty. Two other senior Jamaat leaders, Abul Kalam Azad (tried *in absentia*) and Muhammad Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, had already been sentenced to death for wartime atrocities committed during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

Since then, thousands of people from almost all walks of life have regularly poured into Dhaka's Shahabag Square in protest to demand the death penalty for 1971 war criminals and call for proscriptions on the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) political party and its more violent student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), collectively known as Jamaat-Shibir. Though the movement opposed independence in 1971 and was banned for a time, it now forms the largest political party in Bangladesh. The trials of suspected war criminals are being conducted by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a special panel created to investigate and prosecute those believed to have committed war crimes during the events of 1971.

During the Bangladesh Liberation War, many Jamaat-e-Islami

members acted under the banner of shadowy paramilitaries such as al-Badr, al-Shams and Razakar that were in league with the Pakistan army and Pakistani intelligence agencies. Since then, the movement has sided with groups such as the Islamist Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

In retaliation for the protests, radical elements led by Jamaat-Shibir activists and the pro-Islamic Hefajat-e-Islam carried out a “Long March” on April 6 to demand the death of “atheist bloggers,” as the Shahabag protesters are termed by their Islamist opponents. The Islamists have threatened to besiege Dhaka in early May if their 13-point demands are not addressed by the Shaykh Hasina-led Awami League (AL) government. Their demands call for prohibitions against blasphemy and foreign cultural practices, such as candlelight vigils and free speech in social media, which the Islamists claim are responsible for the protests in Dhaka.

The Islamists have also urged the present government to abolish all laws in conflict with the values of the Quran and Sunnah and to reinstate a 1977 constitutional clause calling for “Absolute trust and faith in Allah” that was removed earlier this year in what the Islamists viewed as an attempt to secularize the state. Stressing that Islam is endangered by the Shahabag protesters, whom they accuse of denigrating Islam and the Prophet, the Islamists accuse the government of taking sides with the “atheists and apostates” of Shahabag Square.

In deference to the Islamists, Prime Minister Shaykh Hasina ordered the arrest of a number of bloggers and reiterated that the country’s existing laws were sufficient to prosecute those who choose to insult Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. At least three known bloggers who are in the forefront of the Shahabag movement have been arrested by the security forces over their allegedly blasphemous postings (Priyo News, April 3).

The ICT verdict and rival protest rallies have triggered widespread violence in the country since mid- February. On February 15, Rajib Haider, a political blogger who was part of the Shahabag demonstrations, was killed outside his home by Jamaat-Shibir activists, allegedly for his “anti-Islamic” and anti-Jamaat postings (Bdnews24.com, February 16). On February 28, at least 40 people, including civilians, cadres of Jamaat-Shibir and security personnel, died in clashes that broke out in Rangpur, Gaibandha Satkhira, Thakurgaon and Chittagong. More than a thousand people sustained injuries in these clashes, which continued for several days. The Jamaat-Shibir cadres have also vented their anger on minority communities across the country, attacking Hindu and Buddhist houses of worship and torching Hindu and Buddhist-owned homes and businesses in numerous places. One estimate suggests 524 Hindu families were affected in targeted attacks between Feb 28 and April 1 (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha [National News Agency of Bangladesh], April 1).

A series of violent incidents occurred on March 31 following the arrest of ICS president Muhammad Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, who was named as a suspect in almost all the recent acts of violence against secular Awami League members and Shahabag protesters (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], April 1; *Daily Sun* [Dhaka], March 31). On April 11, four people were killed and a hundred others injured in clashes between Islamists and Awami League cadres in Khulna and Chittagong during a countrywide dawn-to-dusk shutdown (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], April 12, 2013). Nearly 60 crude bombs went off on April 24 at 20 locations in Dhaka during a strike called by the BNP-led 18-party alliance to protest the denial of bail to seven top BNP leaders (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], April 24).

These incidents are evidence of the continuing sectarian divide in Bangladesh, where disputes over the Liberation War of 1971 threaten to lead the country into a civil war. Amidst this standoff, intelligence agencies fear that the existing volatility could be exploited by clandestine militant groups aligned with mainstream Islamist organizations. However, even a cursory look at the leadership profiles of the Hefajat-e-Islam-led movement shows that leaders of militant groups have already infiltrated the “Defend Islam” movement and are trying to revive dormant militant groups in the country, such as Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami/Bangladesh (HUJI-B), a militant group formed in 1992 to pursue Islamic rule in Bangladesh. Police have recently taken custody of Afghan war veteran and HuJI-B leader Farid Uddin Masud and 12 others, including Pakistan nationals who were reported to be trying to revive militancy in Bangladesh in coordination with former Afghan war veterans and Jamaat Shibir operatives. They are also alleged to be recruiting members to carry out subversive activities in Bangladesh, including political assassinations (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], March 31; *The Hindu*, April 2).

Bangladesh is not new to Islamist terrorism. International and local jihadi groups have operated with impunity and the active patronage of political and religious parties like the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Okiyo Jote (IOJ – Islamic Unity Front), a conglomerate of smaller religious parties. There are at least two proscribed terrorist groups active in Bangladesh, including al-Qaeda/Taliban inspired Deobandi militant groups like HuJI-B and the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), both of which can trace their lineage to Jamaat-e-Islami. Even legal but lesser-known groups like the Chittagong based Hefajat –e-Islam have controversial origins, with suspicious ties to outlawed militant groups like HuJI and JMB. One of the movement’s leaders, Mufti Fayezullah, indicated recently that the group has suicide squads who are prepared to face any situation to uphold Islam (*The Hindu*, April 2).

The existence of a new group, the Islamist militant Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), came to light in early March during the interrogation of five students enrolled at a prestigious

university in Dhaka. All five were arrested in connection with the brutal murder of prominent blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, who played a key role in organizing the Shahbagh movement by demanding the execution of Islamists on trial for alleged atrocities committed during the 1971 Liberation War. In early April, the detective branch arrested four more ABT members for attempting to murder another blogger, Asif Mohiuddin. (*Daily Star*, April 2). Police got their first clue of ABT's existence from the Ansar al-Mujahideen English language forum, an al Qaeda-affiliated website that posted news of the arrested students under the heading "Five Lions of the Ummah." A deeper probe into the website revealed the existence of another extremist site, bab-ul-islam.net, founded last year to target young people in English-language colleges and universities for recruitment to Islamist militant groups (Khabar South Asia, April 3).

Another Hefajat leader, Maulana Habibur Rahman, is a proponent of Taliban-style rule and has connections to militant movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Maulana has admitted in the past that he and eight other Muslim leaders visited the HuJI offices in Karachi and Peshawar in 1998 and met with HuJI-Pakistan chief Saifullah Akhtar and late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], April 7).

While mainstream political parties like the Awami League and the BNP take this opportunity to play vendetta politics ahead of general elections this year, religious parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefajat-e-Islam are attempting to carry out mass mobilization against the government with the support of fringe Islamist groups and formerly subdued militant proxies. The anti-government "Defend Islam" movement is directed at diverting the nation's attention away from past war crimes and to possibly pave the way for an expansion of religion-based politics and the spread of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh.

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Yemen's Military Reforms May Not Hold the Answer to Internal Stability Questions

Ludovico Carlino

Yemen's president, Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, has hastened the pace of political change in Yemen with a series of decrees intended to restructure the national armed forces (*Yemen Post*, April 11). Not only have the April 10 decrees reshaped the Yemeni military system, but Hadi's decisions, by favoring new players and directly targeting prominent figures of the former regime, have also profoundly altered the internal balance of power. The changes come almost one month after the official opening of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), a centerpiece of the Yemeni transition mechanism and the forum in which Yemeni political parties will draw up a new constitution prior to the 2014 elections.

The overhaul of the armed forces represents one of the pillars on which the transition mechanism brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council is built (*Yemen Times*, November 22, 2011). Military-security reforms were envisioned as a necessary measure to restore stability and to unify a fragmented army still facing a host of challenges, from the Houthi rebellion in the north to the activities of jihadis and separatists in the south. However, the armed forces' overhaul had its own political significance, as it could not be achieved without the removal of powerful military figures still loyal to the former regime who were widely considered as a destabilizing force undermining Yemen's political transition.

According to Presidential Decree no. 16/2013, the army will be now be composed of seven commands based on geographical districts, with military divisions based on tasks and regional army commanders independent from local military units (Barakish.net, April 11). [1] Most importantly, the Hadi decrees dismissed General Ahmad Ali Saleh, former head of the Republican Guard and eldest son of the ousted President, and General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, former commander of the First Armored Division (*Saba News*, April 12). Ali Muhsin was a long-time ally of ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh before his defection to opposition forces during the 2011 uprising.

These measures completed the dissolution of two military units largely responsible for the army's fragmentation and whose rivalry imposed a major obstacle to the country's transition; the Republican Guard and the First Armored Division. Following the first major military reform process

that followed the 1994 civil war, these two units began acquiring a semi-autonomous status within the regular army, gradually surfacing as two power centers in the hands of Ali Muhsin (First Armored Division) and Ahmad Ali Saleh (Republican Guard). [2] Muhsin's division of some 40,000 soldiers was considered close to the Islamist Islah party (*Aloulaye*, February 5; *Yemen Times*, April 25). Muhsin was also the commander of the north-western military region, the site of the almost decade-long battle between the central government and Houthi rebels.

Under the authority of Ahmad Ali Saleh, the Republican Guard evolved from a small unit protecting the presidential palace to a 130,000 man elite force comprising 18 of the country's best funded and equipped brigades, a process that changed the balance of power to the detriment of the regular army (*Yemen Post*, December 14, 2012). Inevitably, the growing ambitions of these two centers of power collided in the midst of the 2011 uprising, when intermittent but violent clashes between the First Armored Division and the Republican Guard erupted in Sana'a following Muhsin's defection in March of that year.

President Hadi's efforts to reform the military began shortly after he took charge in February, 2012. In the following two months, Hadi tried to reassign over 20 senior commanders to other positions, prompting strong resistance from those of Saleh's allies who were affected by his measures.

In a sign of how challenging the overhaul has been Air Force Commander Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar, the former president's half-brother, openly defied Hadi's order for several weeks, with his soldiers seizing and shutting down Sana'a Airport for several days before he stepped down on April 25 at the urging of the former president (*Yemen Times*, April 26). Similarly, Hadi began targeting Ahmad Ali directly in August 2012 by removing some of the Republican Guard's most powerful brigades from his command. Republican Guard soldiers stormed the Defense Ministry in protest and two civilians were killed and 15 injured in the clashes that followed (*Yemen Times*, August 16, 2012).

The major reorganization of the armed forces dates back to the decrees issued on December 19, 2012. These pronouncements established a new structure intended to bring command and control of the army under the Ministry of Defense rather than powerful commanders (Barakish.net, December 21, 2012). Five military branches were created – Army, Air Force, Navy, Border Guards and the Strategic Reserve Force. The Special Forces, previously part of Ahmad Ali's Republican Guard, and the counter-terrorism unit, previously part of the Central Security Forces headed by

Saleh's nephew, General Yahya Saleh, were integrated into the newly formed Special Operations Command (Yemenipress.com, December 28, 2012).

The December decrees ordered the dismantling of the First Armored Division and the Republican Guard, although the measures were not immediately brought into effect in the absence of any provisions regarding these units' commanders, Ali Muhsin and Ahmad Ali (*Yemen Times*, April 15; April 25). [3] The April presidential decrees served in part to remedy this problem, as Hadi appointed Ali Muhsin the new presidential military advisor and made Ahmad Ali the new ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. Other influential members of the ex-president's family were also shifted abroad through appointments to the Foreign Service, including Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew, Colonel Ammar Muhammad Abdullah Saleh (the new military attaché in Ethiopia), and Ammar Muhammad's brother, presidential guard commander Tariq Muhammad Abdullah Saleh (Yemen's new military attaché in Germany) (*Aden Tribune*, April 10).

The appointment of over 20 new commanders in the April decrees further loosened the Saleh clan's grip on power, whereas the positions of Hadi and Ali Muhsin appear to have been strengthened. Indeed, almost half of the new appointees in the South are considered allies of President Hadi (who comes from the southern governorate of Abyan) while in the north, Ali Muhsin's associates now control the other half of the military (FnaYemen, April 10; *The National* [Abu Dhabi], April 15).

Hadi's recent decrees mark an important shift towards a more centrally organized Yemeni Army while weakening the personal patronage system that has traditionally entangled the security forces, but questions remain.

While the removal of the remnants of the Saleh network from command positions will surely diminish the influence of loyalists to the former regime within the military establishment, the balance of power has shifted dangerously towards Ali Muhsin, leaving room for future rivalries along geographic lines. Ali Muhsin's rise suggests that the exploitation of Yemen's tribal and patronage dynamics was not just a tactic of the former regime, but also formed a basis for compromises necessary to avoid internal backlash. Although the envisioned aim of Yemen's military reforms was to reduce the influence of powerful commanders and to create a more unified army, the rise of Ali Muhsin's associates in the northern districts and the appointment of Hadi's men in the south risks the creation of further infighting as both forces seek to extend their influence in an increasingly

divided country.

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Notes

1. Yemen Presidential Decree 16/2013, April 10, 2013, <https://presidenthadi-gov-ye.info/en/archives/presidential-decree-divides-military-fields-in-yemen-into-seven-geographical-regions/>.
2. International Crisis Group, “Yemen’s Military-Security Reform: seeds of new conflict?” April 4, 2013. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2013/mena/yemens-military-security-reform-seeds-of-a-new-conflict.aspx>.
3. Yemen Presidential Decree 104/2012, <http://nationalyemen.com/2012/12/22/text-of-the-presidential-decree-to-restructure-the-army/> See also the statement of the Ministry of Defense at Barakish.net, December 19, 2012, <http://barakish.net/news.aspx?cat=12&sub=11&id=41446>.

The Counter-Insurgency Role of Syria’s “Popular Committees”

Nicholas A. Heras

As the Syrian Civil War enters its second year, the Popular Committees (Lija’an Sha’abiya), local defense forces supported by the Syrian military, are taking on an increasingly important role in the country’s conflict. The Popular Committees (sometimes referred to as “Peoples’ Committees”), were reportedly organized initially as neighborhood defense organizations to protect pro-government or politically neutral neighborhoods that were not actively policed by the Syrian military (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], September 4, 2012). Some of the Popular Committees have been accused of perpetrating communal violence, with or without the support of the Syrian military. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria asserts that some Popular Committees have committed kidnappings, arbitrary arrests and killings of Syrian opposition members. [1]

Although accused by the Syrian opposition of serving the same function as the *shabiha* (ghosts) paramilitary units

that have earned a notorious reputation for committing massacres against Syrian opposition members, the Popular Committees, unlike the *shabiha*, are not generally deployed in battle outside their area of residence. They are generally armed with light weapons and are organized on the village and city district level. Popular Committee forces man checkpoints, conduct door-to-door raids and occasionally provide support for the Syrian military against the armed Syrian opposition in divided, heavily-contested areas of the country by holding areas cleared of armed opposition members (*as-Safir* [Beirut], October 12, 2012). A Hezbollah media outlet reports that some Popular Committee forces are being trained in guerilla warfare, surveillance, infiltration and counterintelligence (*al-Manar* [Beirut, February 2]). These military disciplines are widely understood to be specialties of Hezbollah’s armed wing.

Minorities and the Popular Committees

The Popular Committees are frequently associated with Syria’s minority communities, including Christians, Druze and Alawites. Both men and women are recruited as fighters in the Popular Committees (AFP, January 21). The committees are typically mobilized to defend specific villages or urban enclaves, such as Christian districts, against armed attacks (Agenzia Fides, September 18, 2012). Syria’s Kurdish community has also organized Popular Committees, particularly in areas where Kurds are concentrated such as Aleppo and the northeastern al-Jazira region (Syrian Arab News Agency, July 28, 2012). There are even reports of pro-government Sunnis forming Popular Committees in restive areas of the country, including in and around the battlefields of Damascus’ southern suburbs (*al-Mayadeen* [Beirut], October 28, 2012).

Some of these Popular Committees, such as those formed in the diverse suburban district of Jaramana in southern Damascus, are reportedly composed of local fighters forming pan-sectarian fighting fronts that have been particularly effective in stalling armed opposition offensives (*as-Safir* [Beirut], October 12, 2012). Palestinian Popular Committees formed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) are also active in fighting against pro-opposition Palestinian factions inside the neighboring Yarmuk refugee camp and against the Syrian armed opposition in the districts of Hajar al-Aswad and al-Midan (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], November 9, 2012). According to Filippo Grandi, the Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), more than 85 percent of Yarmuk’s pre-civil war population of 150,000 people has been internally displaced in Syria or have become refugees

in neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, due to fighting around Yarmuk (al-Arabiya [Dubai], March 12).

Cooperation with Other Pro-Assad Forces

To enhance the ability of the Popular Committees to assume a greater burden of local and regional defense against the armed opposition, the Assad government is seeking to integrate the Popular Committees into a larger National Defense Army (NDA), reportedly trained with the assistance of the Iranian Quds Force (AFP, January 21). Hezbollah, at least in the strategic central-western province of Homs, is also believed to be assisting in the mobilization, training and deployment of Popular Committees (AP, April 14). The integration into the NDA of village and urban district-level Popular Committees (usually composed primarily of one ethnic or sectarian group from the local area) is designed to raise pro-Assad, pro-Syrian nationalist morale over communal group identity (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], March 2).

A potential model for the Popular Committees/National Defense Forces as effective auxiliaries to the Syrian military or its allies, such as Hezbollah, is found in the strategic central-western Syrian governorate of Homs. Currently, this region of Syria is receiving a great deal of international attention as a result of Hezbollah's involvement in the area and the importance of the Homs governorate to both the Assad government and the opposition (for Hezbollah's role in the Syrian conflict, see *Terrorism Monitor*, November 2, 2012). Popular Committees have been raised in several mixed-faith villages in the Orontes River Valley region west of al-Qusayr, where tens of thousands of residents claim Lebanese nationality.

The Homs region along the Lebanese border is strategically important because it links Damascus to the generally pro-government coastal regions of Syria by highway. Control of the region by the Syrian military, Hezbollah and the Popular Committees prevents the opposition from launching attacks against Hezbollah areas in Lebanon and provides pro-regime forces a route for supply and the transit of fighters from Tripoli and Akkar in northern Lebanon into the battlegrounds of Homs, Damascus and Idlib. Hezbollah's involvement in the villages of the Orontes River valley, west of al-Qusayr, is the result of clan and familial ties between the Shi'a living on both sides of the border. Hezbollah, both better-armed and more established militarily in the border region than the Lebanese military, is able to provide security for the Lebanese villagers in the area of al-Qusayr. [2]

The Popular Committees are reported to be among the first in the area to have been incorporated under the NDA

(*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], March 2). Armed conflict between nominally pro-government villagers and armed opposition groups, including militant Salafists, led to the initial organization of Popular Committees in the area west of al-Qusayr (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], October 27, 2012). These committees are believed to be fighting opposition forces that include Jabhat al-Nusra, the Farouq Battalions (aligned with the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front) and several other fighting groups aligned with the Free Syrian Army (*as-Safir* [Beirut], March 1).

The Battle for al-Qusayr

Recent fighting in the region was launched by the Syrian military and its allies (allegedly including Hezbollah) with the support of Syrian military airpower in order to seize al-Qusayr from armed opposition forces (al-Arabiya [Dubai], April 21). Popular Committee fighters are reportedly patrolling the Lebanese-Syrian border around al-Qusayr and al-Qasr and to be fighting fierce defensive and limited offensive engagements against committed opposition fighters (AP, April 14; *An-Nahar*, April 27). These operations are noteworthy as demonstrations of the willingness of the Popular Committees to confront, clear and hold pro-Assad government villages retaken from the armed opposition groups.

The evolution of the Popular Committees over the course of the Syrian civil war has important implications for the future of civil society in the country. As the Popular Committees in Syria's most restive regions evolve into locally cohesive divisions of a "National Defense Army," they have the capacity to present a great challenge to the future military efforts of the armed opposition. Popular Committees, professionally trained in military doctrine and tactics and battle-tested in communal warfare, are demonstrating in Homs and in Damascus' southern suburbs a readiness to assume the burden of civil defense that the Syrian army increasingly cedes to them.

Conclusion

In the event that the Assad government would have to contract its area of control into an Alawite-dominated "rump state" with a capital in Damascus connected to a coastal strip of territory in the provinces of Homs, Tartus and Latakia, Popular Committees organized on a local level would provide a source of security and manpower to aid police efforts in confronting the armed opposition. The Popular Committee/NDA units could also provide a pan-sectarian, "Syrian patriotic" political veneer and military front for a state likely to remain politically dominated by Alawites but dependent

upon a loyal but minority-dominated base of support. In the event of the total collapse of the Assad government, the Popular Committees and the NDA may face severe retribution from the armed opposition and could become major combatants in communal warfare throughout the country.

Militant Islamist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the militias of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, including Ahrar al-Sham and the Farouq Brigades, have allegedly been involved in some of the bitterest communal fighting in the country. The potential for communal violence in highly diverse, socially complex regions of Syria, such as Homs, the cities of Damascus and Aleppo and the northeastern al-Jazira region in and around the city of Qamishli, poses immense challenges to necessary transitional processes, including demobilization, disarmament, establishment of the rule of law and the re-integration of militarized communities such

as the Popular Committees into a wider Syrian body politic.

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Notes

1. United Nations News Center, “Both sides in Syria ‘increasingly reckless’ with civilian lives – independent UN panel,” UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, March 11, 2013, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44332#.UYCRako5WzY>.
2. Information in this paragraph is based on an interview conducted by the author with a Lebanese Army source with extensive operational experience throughout Lebanon who requested anonymity due to being on active duty. Interview conducted on April 17, 2013.