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Chadian soldiers patrol the streets of Gao, in northern Mali

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## ARABS AND TUAREG CLASH IN STRUGGLE FOR DESTINY OF NORTHERN MALI

*Andrew McGregor*

New fighting between northern Mali's Arab community and the Tuareg rebels working with French intervention forces in the region threatens to escalate into a wider ethnic conflict in the run-up to July's national elections. While efforts are under way to ease tensions between the communities, there is also suspicion that some of these efforts are opportunistic and designed to advance certain personal political agendas. The clashes, centered around the town of Bir, have involved members of the largely Tuareg Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA – a secular separatist movement) and the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA), an Arab militia created in February 2012 as the Front de Libération nationale de l'Azawad (FLNA) and formed from members of earlier Arab militias and Arab soldiers of the Malian Army who deserted after the fall of Timbuktu to Islamist groups last year.

The MAA announced it had expelled Tuareg fighters belonging to the MNLA from the town of Bir (30 miles northeast of Timbuktu) on April 22 after 14 to 15 MAA battlewagons entered the town. Movement spokesman Moloud Muhammad Ramadan said the action was taken to protect village residents who were threatened by the MNLA's presence, though there were later charges that MAA fighters looted Tuareg properties in Bir (*al-Akhbar* [Nouakchott], April 22). French military aircraft overflew the town several times to observe the situation, though they did not send in ground forces (RFI, April 26). As clashes between Arabs and Tuareg intensified, troops from Burkina Faso and the Malian Army entered Bir on May 6 (AP, May 7). The Arab fighters withdrew, but remained close to the town to observe developments and await an opportunity to return.

Malian troops conducted searches and carried out arrests in Bir, but they and the Burkinabe force withdrew by May 10, leaving the town open to new outbreaks of violence as a column of Arab battlewagons re-entered Bir on May 11, looting homes and shops while searching for Tuareg men. MAA spokesmen Moloud Muhammad Ramadan admitted that the Arab fighters were members of the MAA, but insisted they were operating outside the movement's control in an effort to retrieve items looted from the Arab community in In Khalil by Tuareg members of the MNLA (RFI, May 12). The local Tuareg community claims to have had nothing to do with the MNLA looting of In Khalil. Ramadan denied charges that Tuareg livestock at Bir were slaughtered by MAA fighters and stated that the MAA "has nothing against the Tuareg, but hunts the MNLA wherever it may be" (Mali Actualités, May 5).

The trouble in Bir has its direct origin in the MNLA's occupation of the border town of In Khalil in February, which Arab residents claim was followed by wide-scale pillaging and rape. The MAA responded by attacking the MNLA positions in In Khalil on February 23 with a column led by MAA military commander Colonel Hussein Ould Ghulam. The Arab militia was driven off after being hit by French airstrikes in support of the MNLA (*Le Combat* [Bamako], February 23; see Terrorism Monitor Brief, March 8).

To press their demands for the return of Arab property or cash compensation, MAA fighters kidnapped the son of the Tuareg *marabout* (Islamic religious scholar) of Bir, who remains missing (RFI, May 9). However, Arab elders in the town opposed the kidnapping, suggesting it would result only in more violence between the communities (RFI, April 29).

Clashes between Tuareg and Arab groups have occurred elsewhere in northern Mali as well. Arab residents of Anefis, a town roughly halfway between Gao and Kidal, complain that Tuareg fighters of the MNLA entered that town on April 24, killing four Arab merchants before cleaning out their shop and charging fees to pass through MNLA checkpoints (*Procès Verbal* [Bamako], May 1). It is not only the rebel Tuareg that have come into conflict with the Arabs of northern Mali; Arab residents of the town of Taguilalt (60 miles outside of Gao) have complained that Tuareg troops of the Malian Army (presumably part of Colonel al-Hajj ag-Gamou's command) looted the village on April 16, arresting 12 Arab men and "provoking and humiliating" other Arab residents (*al-Akhbar* [Nouakchott], April 17). The Timbuktu Arab community is still calling for information on the whereabouts of eight Arab traders and one Songhai member who they claim were abducted by Malian troops on February 14. Malian authorities in Timbuktu claim only one Arab

trader was taken (RFI, May 2).

Besides the Arab "self-defense" militias, Malian Arabs seeking reforms through legal and democratic means formed al-Karama (Dignity) last year in the Mauritanian capital of Nouakchott, where many Malian Arabs have taken refuge for the duration of hostilities in northern Mali. Though they admit they lack political experience, al-Karama leaders say they will not concede the right to govern to "cunning" and more experienced political operators who rule through "the lie, the plot and the threat" (Mali Actualités, April 12). The leader of al-Karama is Muhammad Tahir Ould al-Hajj, a leading member of the Timbuktu Arab community. The movement's secretary, Muhammad Ould Mahmud, insists al-Karama opposes all forms of terrorism and drug-trafficking and welcomes the recent establishment of a national Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission (Mali Actualités, May 4).

In a parallel effort to find a political solution to the situation in northern Mali, the High Council of Azawad was formed on May 2 by a number of Kidal community leaders and headed by Muhammad ag Intallah, a son of the chief of the Ifoghas Tuareg of Kidal, Intallah ag Attaher. The mainly Tuareg group says it seeks to unite all the "sons of the Azawad" under a single banner to negotiate with Bamako without recourse to armed struggle, partition or alliance with Islamist groups (RFI, May 7). However, despite accusations that the HCA is nothing more than a renamed version of the rebel MNLA, that movement has announced it wants no part of the HCA and is seeking direct negotiations with Bamako (RFI, April 26; May 8). Bamako, in turn, insists on MNLA disarmament before talks can begin. There are, however, reports that fighters of the largely Tuareg Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad (MIA) led by Alghabass ag Intallah (another son and designated successor of the Ifoghas chief) are integrating into the MNLA. These reports would seem to confirm earlier charges that the recently formed MIA was nothing more than a way-station for Ansar al-Din defectors seeking to join the secular MNLA before direct talks resume with Bamako (RFI, April 29; for Alghabass ag Intallah and the MIA, see Militant Leadership Monitor, January 30).

The Arab-Tuareg tensions are escalating as the defeated Islamist groups turn to terrorist tactics to prolong their struggle against French "Crusaders," their military allies and the Malian state:

- On May 4, two Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) suicide bombers killed two members of the Malian military when they attacked a patrol near Gao (RFI, May 5).
- On May 10, three suicide bombers attacked a Malian

Army checkpoint in Gossi, while a fourth was killed trying to enter the Gossi military camp. In the early hours of the same day, an assailant tried to drive a car bomb into the camp used by Nigérien troops in Menaka, but was killed when his car exploded under fire from the camp's guards (Reuters, May 10; AFP, May 10). The Niger deployment has also been struck by the death in Bamako of its senior officer, General Yaya Seyni Garba, apparently from natural causes (Agence de Presse Africaine, May 11).

- Three suicide bombers struck in Gossi on May 11, wounding two soldiers, while a fourth suicide bomber was killed in Menaka before he could detonate his explosives. MUJWA claims responsibility for both attacks (AP, May 11). The continuing attacks bring into question the security of nation-wide elections planned for July.
- While Bamako has escaped most of the violence that has consumed the north for the last year, there are disturbing indications that the dispersed Islamists are preparing new attacks within the capital. In late April, Malian military intelligence arrested seven Malian citizens alleged to be members of a MUJWA cell preparing a bombing campaign in Bamako (RFI, April 29; Jeune Afrique, May 1).

Meanwhile, there are reports that the 2012 military coup leader, Captain Amadou Sanogo, is seeking asylum in Gabon or Nigeria. Sanogo, who has barely left the Kati military base outside of Bamako since the coup, is alleged to now fear reprisals from other members of the military after a number of internal clashes and disputes within the army (PANA Online [Dakar], May 1).

## NIGER REVAMPS SECURITY STRUCTURE TO FACE ISLAMIST THREAT

*Andrew McGregor*

As Niger struggles to expand its uranium industry and exploit potentially rich oil reserves in its northern regions, it has been forced to address the security consequences of being a neighbor to northern Mali, southern Libya and northern Nigeria, all regions experiencing large levels of political and religious violence that have little respect for national borders.

Niger's army played an important role in Operation Serval, the French-led military intervention in northern Mali.

Rather than operating with the rest of the African units that gathered in Bamako but played no important role in the fighting, Nigérien troops entered northern Mali alongside Chadian forces from Mali's southern border with Niger. Niger now deploys over 650 soldiers in northern Mali at Gao, Ansongo and Menaka (RFI, May 12). The Nigérien base at Menaka was the target of a May 10 suicide attack. A car full of explosives managed to burst through the gates of the camp, but was destroyed by Nigérien troops without any casualties other than the suicide attacker (AFP, May 10).

Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou, who has met three times in the last year with French president François Hollande, is urging a strong mandate for the UN peacekeeping force that is expected to replace the current ECOWAS operation: "It should not be a classical-type mission like was the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Balkans or in the Congo. Considering the nature of the enemy, this mission should be offensive" (RFI Online, May 14).

Niger's foreign minister, Muhammad Bazoum, recently warned it had obtained information confirming that armed Islamists driven out of northern Mali by Operation Serval had shifted operations to Libya's lightly-governed southwest, presumably by passing through northern Niger. According to Bazoum, "Mali has been settled, but Libya is far from being resolved, and today we think Libya is one of the biggest international terrorism bases... These bases, because they are terrorists, they will be a threat for Libya's immediate neighbors" (Reuters, May 2). Veteran Nigérien Tubu militant Barka Wardougou also appears to have shifted his base of operations across the border into southern Libya, which has a substantial Tubu population.

Though Niger is usually graded as the poorest nation in the world, it has been forced to increase its defense budget in reaction to external threats and the presence of al-Qaeda operatives in the northern desert. While the minister of defense boasts of increased salaries, expanded recruitment and purchases of military equipment such as tanks, the minister of the interior points out that "this is money that we take from the education and health budgets" (*Jeune Afrique*, April 29). There are also plans to expand Niger's internal intelligence agency, which consists at the moment of only roughly 100 men.

Niger's army, the roughly 8,000 man Forces Armées Nigériennes (FAN), is dominated by members of the Djerma-Songhai, historical rivals of the Saharan Tuareg of northern Niger, who, like their cousins in northern Mali, have engaged in several rebellions against the southern-dominated government. Though the Tuareg rebels of northern Mali



and northern Niger have cooperated in the past, there have been no overt signs of unrest amongst the Tuareg of Niger since the Tuareg/Islamist rebellion began in Mali last year. The army continues to have close ties to France, the former colonial power, but has received increasing levels of U.S. training and assistance in recent years. A new U.S. training mission for African peacekeepers operating in Mali will begin on June 24 and will involve up to 30 U.S. instructors (Reuters, May 16). There are already roughly 100 American military personnel in Niger, most of them involved with the operation and protection of U.S. drones based in Niamey.

French and American drones began flying surveillance missions out of Niamey's Hamani-Diori Airport in February and there is speculation that Washington may consider creating a permanent base for drone operations in Niger. Despite Niger's ever-precarious economic situation, the presence of these unmanned aircraft has created a degree of "drone envy" in the Niamey government and military, which is "seriously considering" the purchase of its own drones. According to President Issoufou: "Without them we are blind and deaf people" (*Jeune Afrique*, April 22).

Nigeria's Boko Haram and bandits posing as Boko Haram members continue to pose a threat to security in the areas along Niger's southern border with Nigeria. To counter these activities, Niger contributes troops to the decade-old Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF), composed of troops from Nigeria, Chad and Niger. The MJTF runs operations against Boko Haram groups active in the border region, though Niamey recently denied Nigerian claims that Nigérien troops were involved in an April 19 firefight near Lake Chad in which 185 civilians were killed in the crossfire between security forces and Boko Haram suspects. Niger defense minister Mahamadou Karidjo maintained that "No element of Niger's army took part in these clashes... Boko Haram is not a direct threat for Niger; we are leaving Nigerians to deal with their own problem" (AFP, April 26). In recent days more than 1500 Nigérien nationals who had been living on the Nigerian side of the border have fled the recurrent Boko Haram-related violence around Lake Chad back into an area of Niger that is already experiencing a food crisis (RFI Online, May 14).

Niger also faces the task of dealing with Nigérien jihadists returning home after being dispersed by Operation Serval. Many are reported to be Fulanis who were offered considerable recruitment bonuses but had little ideological commitment to the Islamist cause (*Jeune Afrique*, April 29). The best known returnee is Hisham Bilal, a former commander in the Islamist Movement for Unity and Justice in West Africa (MUJWA) who returned to Niger with his

men last November after complaining that MUJWA's Arab leaders used Black African jihadists as "cannon fodder" (AFP, November 9, 2012).

## Has al-Qaeda in Iran Gone Operational? The Evidence from Canada

*Nima Adalkah*

Two men were charged in Canada on April 23 with conspiring to commit murder and terrorism in relation to an alleged plot to derail a Canadian passenger train providing service to and from New York City. Though the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) maintained the plot was not state-sponsored, they claimed the suspects had received support in the plot from al-Qaeda operatives based in Iran. The suspects were identified as Chiheb Esseghaier, a 30-year-old Tunisian living in Montreal, and Raed Jaser, a 35-year-old Palestinian with permanent resident status in Canada (*National Post* [Toronto], April 22; *Globe and Mail* [Toronto], April 25).

According to the RCMP, the kind of support that al-Qaeda in Iran offered was mostly of a "direction and guidance" nature. As for Iranian involvement, it is not clear how Iran was used in the operation, but most likely it served as a covert meeting place for operatives travelling between Pakistan and Iraq (al-Arabiya, April 26). Chiheb Esseghaier has travelled to Iran in the last two years and is alleged to have been in contact with an al-Qaeda facilitator in Iran (CTV [Toronto], April 25).

In response, Tehran has denied allegations of any ties to al-Qaeda. Alaedin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Iranian Consultative Assembly's foreign policy and national security committee, vehemently rejected Canadian claims that al-Qaeda has a presence in Iran and stated that if anyone associated with the terrorist organization was found in the country, he would be arrested by security forces (Hamshahri Online, April 30). Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi described the Canadian allegations as the "most laughable thing I have heard in the 64 years of my life" (Jame-e Jam TV [Tehran], April 23; ISNA, April 23). Salehi added: "We hope Canadian officials show a little wisdom and pay attention to the world's public opinion and intelligence" (IRNA, April 23).

In fact, Tehran claims that its security forces have arrested a number of al-Qaeda operatives and have extradited some them to their home countries. The latest arrest took in March, when three al-Qaeda members were arrested by the Iranian regular army at the western border with Iraq (Hamshahri

Online, March 14). According to Iranian police authorities, five al-Qaeda members were also arrested in the province of Kerman in September, 2011 while attempting to smuggle large quantities of arms and explosives into Iran (Fars News Agency, September 6, 2011; Payvand.com, September 6, 2011).

Iran's rejection of accusations it has ties to al-Qaeda reflects years of rocky relations between Shi'a Iran and the hardline Sunni terrorist group. Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq affiliated with al-Qaeda have frequently attacked Shi'a religious targets, especially places where Iranians congregate for pilgrimage to Shi'a holy places in Iraq. In Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliated militant group, is seeking the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, who is viewed by al-Qaeda as an Alawi Shi'a heretic (Arab News, April 24). Syria is a major ally of Iran; Iranian support for the Syrian government puts al-Qaeda and Tehran at military odds. As the June, 2009 memo by Bin Laden recalls, al-Qaeda views Iranians as "criminals" for their religious beliefs and erratic policies (al-Jazeera, May 5, 2012; *Tabnak* [Tehran] May 3).

The Tehran-al-Qaeda connection, if any exists on a substantial level, is likely informal at best. After the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban, a number of al-Qaeda members fled to Iran, including some of Bin Laden's closest relatives (al-Jazeera, July 19, 2010). Mostly likely they were first based in Iran's Baluchistan province and later transferred to a compound in Tehran, with many of the newly arrived al-Qaeda members being detained by the Iranian security forces. One al-Qaeda figure, Mahfouz Ould al-Walid, a Mauritanian who rejected the September 11 attacks, was held under house arrest until 2012, when he was extradited to Mauritania (al-Jazeera TV, October 30, 2012). Bin Laden son-in-law Sulayman Abu Ghaith, now facing terrorism charges in the United States, spent over a decade under house arrest in Iran, beginning soon after his arrival in early 2002 (al-Jazeera, March 11). In detaining al-Qaeda leaders in Iran, Tehran's objective has been to use them as a bargaining chip in its relations with the United States and certain Sunni militant groups who attack Shi'a targets in Iraq.

Iran sees the al-Qaeda members as an asset in future negotiations with Washington, however, there is also the possibility that some key members of the movement move around Sunni populated regions like Iran's Baluchistan province in disguise, roaming freely without the knowledge of Tehran. According to the U.S. government, al-Qaeda "facilitators and financiers" Mohsen al-Fadhli and Adel Radhi Wahabi Harbi have been based in Iran for over a decade, moving "fighters and money through Turkey to support al-Qaeda-affiliated elements in Syria. [1]

The objective of al-Qaeda operatives in Iran could be to provide financial and logistical support to terrorist activities in Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia, or to facilitate operations in other regions, such as North America. However, the

main target of such operatives at the moment would likely be the threat posed by the "Shi'a hegemony" advanced by Tehran and Damascus, a threat greater than that posed by Israel and the United States. In this environment, covert al-Qaeda operatives would seek to strike at the Iranian enemy from within its own territory, possibly with the support of youths drawn from Iran's Sunni population (approximately 9 percent of Iran's total).

According to one report, there is a growing movement toward Salafist ideology in Kurdish regions of Iran, principally in Sanandaj, the capital of Iran's Kurdistan Province (*Ettella'at* [Tehran], May 7). The report also describes how al-Qaeda operatives travel frequently in Iran's Kurdistan and Azerbaijan provinces, perhaps due to their close proximity to Iraq and the Republic of Azerbaijan, where 17 members of an "al-Qaeda-associated group" were sentenced to prison terms in 2012 (*Tabnak*, April 19, 2012; Euronews, May 15, 2012).

According to government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, al-Qaeda has a military base in Iran, a claim Iran has denied and may be merely a reflection of the poor relations between the two countries (*Tabnak*, 19 April 2012). However, it is possible that al-Qaeda has clandestine bases in Iranian Kurdistan and Baluchistan with operational plans for financial, information and military activities intended for both regional and transnational purposes, all without the knowledge of the Iranian government.

From Tehran's perspective, al-Qaeda is a threat, though not an existential one. There is, in this sense, the possibility of a tactical alliance with al-Qaeda, with the possible mediation of the Taliban. If such an alliance were possible, it would underscore Iran's attempt to project anti-American influence in Afghanistan and provide a warning against a possible American attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

What we do not know is how or where an al-Qaeda faction in Iran operates, or the extent to which the Iranian government is aware of such activities. This does not mean that Tehran cannot reach out to al-Qaeda on a strategic level for military purposes, as it did in south Lebanon by creating Hezbollah in 1982 while in the midst of a war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, though current conditions would seem to impose constraints on Iran's ability to seek an alliance with al-Qaeda or other militant Salafist groups.

If there were any single factor that could deter Iran from seeking an alliance with al-Qaeda, it would likely be the situation in Syria. With the expansion of the Syrian unrest, the al-Qaeda faction in Iran could provide support to Syrian insurgents against the Assad regime, or, with increasing sectarian violence in Syria, possibly even conduct military activities against Tehran inside Iranian territory. In either situation, the apparent revival of al-Qaeda in light of the worsening situation in Syria could pose a major

security threat to Iran and other parts of the region, while repercussions could be felt in the West through operations such as the alleged plot to derail a Canadian train with maximum casualties.

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#### Note

1. U.S. Department of State, “Rewards for Justice – al-Qaida Reward Offers,” Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington D.C., October 18, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/10/199299.htm>.

## Lebanese Salafist Cleric Organizes Militia Forays into Syria

*Chris Zambelis*

With the militarization of the Syrian uprising complete, the makeup of the violent insurrection that is raging across Syria remains a topic of scrutiny. The assemblage of competing opposition forces persists in its attempts to coalesce a viable political front to challenge the Ba’athist regime, yet it has become apparent that radical Islamists of various ideological persuasions will dictate the course of the rebellion. The role being played by foreign fighters who are flocking to Syria to join local armed factions adds another dangerous element to an already combustible mix. The enduring conflict has also elevated the risk of the violence spilling over into neighboring countries, especially Lebanon. In this context, the recent decision by hardline Lebanese Salafist cleric Shaykh Ahmad al-Assir to mobilize an armed militia to join the uprising in Syria bears closer attention. From his base in the southern Lebanese port city of Sidon, al-Assir announced on April 22 the establishment of the Kataib al-Muqawama al-Hurr (Free Resistance Brigades), a purported volunteer force consisting of Lebanese Sunni Muslims who have committed to joining the armed opposition in Syria (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], April 27; *al-Arabiya* [Dubai], April 23).

Combining a proclivity for confrontation, inflammatory rhetoric that he broadcasts during his sermons at the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque (located just outside of Sidon in Abra) and a network of online social media outlets, al-Assir has emerged

as a polarizing figure in Lebanon. [1] Owing to a militant Salafist worldview that tends to see Shi’a Muslims as heretics and apostates, al-Assir’s oratory is replete with invective targeting Hezbollah and Iran. Al-Assir singles out Hezbollah and its Iranian patron over their activities in Lebanon and the alliance they share with Syria. For al-Assir, Hezbollah and Iran represent hegemonic and malicious forces that aim to divide Muslims and subjugate Lebanon. However, al-Assir, whose mother hailed from a Shi’a family, also claims to distinguish between Shi’a currents such as those led by the Lebanese-Iranian cleric Musa al-Sadr, who founded the Lebanese Amal Movement, and that promulgated by Iranian cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who led the 1979 Iranian Revolution (*al-Akhbar*, March 2, 2012).

Nonetheless, al-Assir’s incendiary politics cater to a conservative Lebanese Sunni constituency that is heavily influenced by sectarianism in the absence of a credible ideological alternative at a time of heightened sectarian tensions in Lebanon. Al-Assir’s rise in prominence has occurred amidst the growing influence of the Salafist current in Lebanon, a trend that has come at the expense of mainstream Sunni-led political parties and movements that have proved, in the eyes of their supporters, to be weak in the face of Hezbollah. The expansion of Salafist influence in Lebanon was accelerated, for example, by the violence in 2008 in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon that witnessed Hezbollah and its allies rout militias associated with the March 14 bloc of political movements led by former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri’s Future Movement (*al-Jazeera* [Doha], May 11, 2008).

Al-Assir frames the uprising in Syria in sectarian terms in which an heretical and apostate regime headed by an Alawite is waging war against an oppressed Sunni population: “There is a religious duty on every Muslim who is able to do so... to enter into Syria in order to defend its people, its mosques and religious shrines, especially in al-Qusayr and Homs” (*al-Jazeera*, April 24). Congregants of the Bilal bin Rabah mosque, according to al-Assir, are already active on the Syrian battlefield (*al-Akhbar*, April 27). Volunteer fighters are reportedly being provided training and other forms of logistical support in Lebanon prior to being dispatched to Syria. The creation of al-Assir’s fighting force is the apparent culmination of earlier threats to muster a militia to represent Lebanese Sunnis. After a series of clashes in November, 2012 between his supporters and those of Hezbollah in the Taamir Ayn al-Hilweh district of Sidon, al-Assir announced his plans to organize an armed wing to counter “the Iranian project” in Lebanon (i.e. Hezbollah) (*al-Akhbar*, November 13, 2012; *Daily Star* [Beirut], November 11, 2012).



The intended destination of al-Assir's fighters provides critical insight into his wider objectives. Al-Assir affirmed that his force would be joining the fight in the Syrian town of al-Qusayr, among other places. The significance of his reference to al-Qusayr, an opposition stronghold located in Homs Province along the Syrian-Lebanese border, should not be understated. Al-Qusayr and its vicinity has been the site of heated battles between insurgents and the Syrian security forces. In addition to occupying a strategic location between Damascus and the Mediterranean coastal region, the environs of al-Qusayr are host to a demographic that is diverse in its composition and politics – the region is home to villages that include thousands of Shi'a, Sunnis, Christians and Alawites who claim to be Lebanese.

While the true extent of its operational activities in Syria remains a matter of debate, Hezbollah has been candid about its presence in the vicinity of al-Qusayr. For Hezbollah, the presence of self-identifying Lebanese, many of who maintain family and kinship bonds with Lebanese residing over the border in the Bekaa Valley, warrants their protection (al-Manar [Beirut], October 11, 2012). Hezbollah has since reaffirmed its commitment to defend these villages from the insurgents. Meanwhile, in a seemingly calculated attempt at publicity, video footage that was reportedly recorded in al-Qusayr showing al-Assir firing a weapon beside members of the armed opposition was broadcast a few days after the formation of his militia. Photographs of al-Assir sitting on top of a Syrian tank captured by insurgents beside his son and members of the armed opposition were also published (*Daily Star*, May 3; LBCI [Beirut], April 30).

Al-Assir's dramatic foray into Syria has implications for Lebanon. Lebanese foreign fighters already constitute a sizeable part of the foreign militant force fighting on behalf of the Syrian opposition. At the same time, it is difficult to conceive how al-Assir's hastily organized militia can tip the scales in favor of the opposition in heavily contested areas such as al-Qusayr. Rather, al-Assir may attempt to leverage his actions in Syria to position himself as a guardian of Sunni interests in Lebanon.

Owing to political, demographic, socio-cultural, economic and geographic aspects, Lebanon's fortunes are inextricably linked to events in Syria. Equally important to understanding al-Assir's role in Lebanon is the human geography unique to his base in Sidon, a predominantly Sunni city whose inhabitants lean strongly toward the March 14 bloc and, increasingly, hardline Salafist currents. The March 14 bloc has led the campaign to support the political and armed wings of the Syrian opposition. Yet Sidon is located in Lebanon's mostly Shi'a south, a locus of support for political parties

and movements that make up the Hezbollah-dominated March 8 bloc. This has not prevented al-Assir from inciting his supporters to provoke Hezbollah in Sidon and elsewhere through public shows of force, including demonstrations and sit-ins in contentious locations such as Shi'a mosques that attract Hezbollah partisans.

Al-Assir's actions have resonated beyond Sidon. Hardline Salafist ideologues such as Shaykh Salem al-Rifai, who is based in Tripoli, another sectarian flashpoint city, has also endorsed al-Assir's call for Lebanese Sunnis to take up arms in Syria alongside the opposition. Al-Assir's increasingly strident positions are likely to further arouse political and sectarian tensions in Lebanon, raising the specter of violence and instability in the months to come.

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Note

1. The official website of the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque is available at <http://bilalbinrabah.org/>. Al-Assir's official Twitter page is available at [https://twitter.com/ahmad\\_alaseer](https://twitter.com/ahmad_alaseer).

## Ombatse: Nigerian Religious Cult Joins War on the State in Central Nigeria

*Andrew McGregor*

Nigeria has experienced years of sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims and endured massacres and bombings by religiously-inspired groups like Boko Haram. Now, however, with the slaughter of as many as 90 members of Nigeria's security forces, practitioners of one of Nigeria's many forms of traditional religion have challenged the state's authority in central Nigeria's Nasarawa State, lying roughly on the dividing line between the Muslim majority north and the Christian majority south.

## Traditional Religion and Moral Reform in Nasarawa

The Ombatse cult is based on traditional forms of worship practiced by the Eggon ethnic group. The Eggon people of Nasarawa State are roughly divided in their religious allegiance to Christianity and Islam, but many see no contradiction in also following more traditional belief systems. The Eggon speak their own Benue-Congo language (Eggon), though traditional oral histories of the group trace their origin to Yemen. Today, they are concentrated in the Lafia, Akwanga and Nasarawa-Eggon districts of Nasarawa State.

Though Ombatse (meaning “Time has Come”) has kept a relatively low profile for some years despite occasional clashes with non-Eggon neighbors and police, the traditional religious movement has embarked on a violent campaign of moral and spiritual reform implemented through forced conversions, though the campaign also draws on currents of political frustration and perennial disputes with semi-nomadic herders like the Fulani, who use the same land as sedentary agriculturalists like the Eggon.

Ombatse was allegedly formed as the result of a revelation received in a dream that called for male Eggons to purify society and rid it of social evils such as promiscuity, adultery, crime, alcohol consumption and smoking (Daily Trust [Lagos], November 25, 2012). One Ombatse member described the group’s focus: “The sect is highly purified and its members are not into alcoholism, sexual intercourse and stealing. Our members are highly moral and dedicated to their cause only” (BBC Hausa, May 10). The group’s founders have been identified as movement chairman Haruna Musa Zico Kigbu, movement secretary Zabura Musa Akwanshiki, Sgt. Alaku Ehe, Shuaibu Alkali, Iliyasu Hassan Gyabo and Abdullahi Usman.

According to the Ombatse chairman: “The religion had existed since time immemorial with a shrine ‘Azhili’ interceding for the people. Consequently, people linked with the ‘Ombatse Group’ usually ask the shrine for rain, good harvest and many other fortunes. Therefore, Ombatse Group is not a [form of] witchcraft; neither does it have anything to do with fighting wars” (National Mirror [Lagos], December 2, 2012).

Ombatse spokesman, Zachary Zamani Allumaga, explained the purpose of the movement and its origins in a December, 2012 interview with a Nigerian daily.

The invasion of the Europeans, Christianity and the Islamic jihad, all these influx changed the status quo. Our

forefathers had their own way of worship which is the traditional way of worship before the influx. The coming of these foreigners infiltrated the place and consequently affected their style of worship. My father who is still alive practiced both the traditional religion and Christianity and he is still alive. I also have an uncle who is a Muslim and at the same time practices the traditional religion. These have all tested the two divides. I am a confirmed communicant Catholic and at the same time too, a traditional worshipper. Now, what led to us bringing back this traditional worship to our people is because of the complaints we receive every now and then from our people about the evil and vices that have pervaded our society and our state. These things were not there according to what our fathers told us. The society used to be serene and orderly till the advent of the foreigners. Some of those societal ills include murder, theft, rumor mongering, secret society and witchcraft (*Vanguard* [Lagos], December 22, 2012).

Ombatse members typically wear black clothing and bundles of charms to provide magical protection from gunfire. There is little place for women in Ombatse and they are barred from entering Ombatse shrines. Both Ombatse leaders and their opponents point out that not all Eggon are members of the traditional cult. Ombatse and all other ethnic militias in Nasarawa State were officially banned in late 2012.

## Spiraling Violence in the Eggon Community

A pattern of worsening communal and religiously-inspired violence has emerged over the last year in Nasarawa State:

- June 2012 – Communal violence erupts between the Eggon and the Alago ethnic group. The latter took the worst of it, complaining that local security forces were unwilling to intervene against the Ombatse militia (*Leadership* [Abuja], July 1; *Daily Trust* [Lagos], January 19).
- Mid-October, 2012 - Several clashes erupt between Eggon and Fulani. Many of the dead were reported mutilated by machetes (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], January 19).
- November 17, 2012 - An attempt by Nigerian security forces to raid the Allogani cult center in the Nasarawa-Eggon district on November 17 to arrest the Ombatse chairman and secretary while they were conducting an initiation and oath-taking ceremony resulted in a gunfight in which three soldiers were shot. Hours later, cult members set up a barricade on the Lafia-Akwanga road and smashed cars that attempted to evade the barricade. Security forces endured abuse from the drivers



of long lines of halted vehicles for their failure to remove the barricades (*Sunday Trust* [Lagos], November 18, 2012). The raid brought Ombatse into conflict with the state; according to Ombatse spokesman Zachary Zamani Allumaga: “What happened that day at the Azhili shrine when the security operatives invaded us was reminiscent of what terrorists would do by using a suicide bomber to bomb a church. I can’t still imagine” (*Vanguard* [Lagos], December 22, 2012).

- November 21, 2012 – Violence erupted in Agyaragu, a suburb of the state capital of Lafia, when Ombatse killed at least ten people of the Christian and animist Koro ethnic group (a.k.a. Jijili, Migili) with firearms, machetes and axes. Some 50 homes were also burnt to the ground (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], November 21, 2012; November 25, 2012). Following the incident, Ombatse chairman Haruna Musa Zico Kigbu denied his movement had anything to do with the communal violence: “As far as we are concerned, our rules forbid members from starting a fight and killing, and as such, we cannot be connected with violence” (*Daily Independent* [Lagos], December 12, 2012).
- January 9-14, 2013 - Seven Fulani were killed by Ombatse members in a pair of remote villages in Nasarawa State. The Ombatse members also killed a large number of Fulani-owned cattle, which they leave behind in accordance with their beliefs. Dozens may have been killed in the retaliatory fighting that followed (*Royal Times of Nigeria*, January 14; *Daily Trust* [Lagos], January 19).
- January 13, 2013 - Five Ombatse members were killed by security forces when they tried to prevent the seizure of a large quantity of arms and ammunition (*Royal Times of Nigeria*, January 14).
- February 7, 2013 - Four villages and towns in Nasarawa State experience Fulani vs. Eggon violence. Both Eggon and Fulani blamed the other ethnic group for initiating the fighting (*Sunday Trust* [Lagos], February 10; *Leadership* [Abuja], March 22).

### The Alakyo Massacre

If Ombatse had escaped national attention so far by being classed as yet another ethnic militia clashing with its neighbors in a relatively obscure part of the country, the movement seized national and even international headlines with a massive and deadly ambush of state security forces on their way to raid the Ombatse shrine in Alakyo (six miles outside the state capital of Lafia). The May 9 raid was launched to arrest the movement’s leader after local people had complained the religious movement was carrying out forced conversions and oath-taking in regional churches and

mosques.

Ombatse members claimed a total of 95 policemen and state security agents were killed, while police have admitted to 30, with seven still missing (*Nigerian Tribune*, May 9; AFP, May 9). Most media reports suggested a figure in the range of 55 to 65 dead, but a nurse reported a local hospital had received 90 corpses and was awaiting the arrival of another 17 (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], May 11). Police later revealed that four policemen were still being held hostage by the Ombatse. According to one report, the failed raid was carried out without proper clearance from Abuja and a local military unit declined to join the police and state security men in the raid on these grounds (*Premium Times* [Abuja], May 12).

After the slaughter, the bodies of the security men were burned beyond recognition in large fires. One veteran police respondent described it as “the most cold-blooded act I have witnessed against the law enforcement community in my three decades in the force” (*Premium Times* [Abuja], May 10). Large scale protests by the wives and families of the deceased have paralyzed the state capital as the charred bodies are gradually brought into Lafia.

An Ombatse member described how cult members had heard rumors for days that security forces were preparing to arrest the cult leader. Remaining vigilant, they intercepted 12 trucks full of heavily armed policemen who claimed they were not going to the cult shrine: “We said we did not agree. Suddenly, they threw tear gas at us and it did not affect us. Next, they opened fire and killed nine of our members, and we retaliated by using axes to hack them to death” (BBC Hausa, May 10). Another Ombatse member told a Nigerian news agency: “In self-defense we killed 95 of them, we have no guns. It was machetes that we used in defending ourselves and eventually [we] killed them” (Sahara Reporters [Lagos], May 9).

One officer speaking on behalf of nine other police survivors said it was plain the militia was aware of their coming and had set up an ambush at a particularly narrow part of the road. Perhaps reflecting a common spiritual base with the attackers, the officer recounted that the heavy fire of the security forces was “futile, as bullets were not penetrating them” (*Leadership* [Abuja], May 10). While the ten survivors, many of them wounded, succeeded in escaping in the last truck in the convoy, other officers who tried to flee into the bush were pursued and cut down with machetes. The attackers seized a considerable quantity of arms that will make them an even more potent force on their home ground.

Most alarming was the fact that great lengths had been taken

to keep the timing and destination of the security convoy a secret, even to the extent that most of the men did not know where they were going. As one police officer remarked: “That the cultists would anticipate and wreck this kind of attack on security people speaks volumes of either infiltration or mission betrayal” (*Premium Times* [Abuja], May 10). Two police corporals of Eggon origin were eventually arrested on charges of leaking information regarding the raid to Ombatse. At the time of their arrest they were in possession of three AK-47 rifles and a large quantity of charms (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], May 11).

### Religion or Politics?

Some Eggon claim to have engineered the election of Nasarawa State governor Umaru Tanko al-Makura (a non-Eggon Muslim) by invoking the intervention of the Ombatse shrine. However, al-Makura has since fallen out of favor with the Eggon. Allumaga and other Ombatse leaders now accuse successive Muslim governors of Nasarawa State of attempting to carry out an “ethnic cleansing” of Eggon from parts of the state (*Nigerian Tribune*, May 12). Many Eggon are now supporting the candidacy of a fellow Eggon, current state minister of information Labaran Maku, in the 2015 election for governor.

Ethnic militias have frequently been formed and deployed for intimidation purposes in Nigerian electoral contests and there are some in the state capital of Lafia who believe Ombatse has a political purpose related to the inability of the Eggon to produce a governor from their own group despite their numbers in the state. The militia may in this sense be part of an effort to rally the frequently disunited Eggon behind a single purpose through oath-taking and appeals to traditional norms (*Premium Times* [Abuja], May 10).

The Nasarawa Commissioner for Information, Hamza Elayo, has suggested that some Eggon politicians may have recruited Ombatse to further their cause: “It is obvious they are being sponsored by some ambitious politicians... The security agencies have been closing in on such politicians but I don’t want to mention names” (AFP, May 9). An official statement by Governor al-Makura confirmed the administration’s view that the Ombatse violence was political rather than religious in nature: “The crisis has no religious [dimension] as speculated by some sections of the media; some people are just bent on destroying the state because they feel they are not in power” (*Premium Times* [Abuja], May 12).

Even Ombatse spokesman Zachary Zamani Allumaga has acknowledged the movement has a political purpose.

Referring to their self-declared responsibility for the election of the present governor, Allumaga noted:

There is serious animosity against the Ombatse group simply because they are aware that we went to Azhili [a traditional deity] and prayed for the political landscape of Nasarawa State to change for good, and indeed it changed... As 2015 is approaching, we are aware that some people are planning to ensure the Eggon nation is dislodged from the political landscape of the state, so they call us all kinds of names so that they can hang us. But I can assure you, we are prepared to pray to Azhili with all legitimacy (*Vanguard* [Lagos], December 22, 2012).

### Conclusion

Before the Alakyo massacre, Ombatse spokesmen were united in denying any involvement in the violence in Nasarawa State, often by blaming it on “rogue elements,” but some Ombatse members are now admitting their responsibility for attacks on Nigerian security forces, if not neighboring communities. The Alakyo incident has left Ombatse in control of a large quantity of arms and ammunition, making the cult a significant threat to non-Eggon communities in Nasarawa as well as to state security forces, who will inevitably seek revenge for the horrific slaughter on the road to Alakyo. Whether formed initially by a desire for moral reform, a perceived need for self-defense against aggressive pastoralists or even as an armed adjunct to local electoral politics, Ombatse has entered a new phase of insurgency against the state, giving Abuja yet another security headache in central Nigeria even as it struggles to contain insurgents and terrorists in the northern and southern regions of the country.

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### Note

1. I.D. Hepburn, Ian Maddieson and Roger Blench, *A Dictionary of Eggon*, Cambridge, January 2, 2006, <http://www.rogerblench.info/Language/Niger-Congo/BC/Plateau/South/Eggon%20Dictionary%20full.pdf>.