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HEZBOLLAH DEVISES STRATEGY TO DEAL WITH SYRIAN FALLOUT

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Despite condemnation for their military role in Syria from Sunni elements in Lebanon and abroad, the leader of the Shiite Hezbollah movement maintains that the movement is on the right path and its role in preserving the “Resistance” alliance against Israel will be justified in the coming days. According to a pro-Hezbollah daily, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah told a closed door meeting of Hezbollah leaders and cadres that regardless of the escalation in fighting: “the results of what is happening will be in the interest of the Resistance forces... The coming days will confirm that the decisions made over the past two years were the right ones, be it regarding the situation in Lebanon or what is happening in Syria” (*al-Safir* [Beirut], July 3).

The Hezbollah meeting came only days before a car-bomb wounded over 50 people in the largely Shiite Beirut suburb of Bir al-Abd on July 9. Though the explosion was widely interpreted as the fulfillment of promises by Sunni extremists fighting in Syria to target the Shiite suburbs of southern Beirut if Hezbollah failed to withdraw its military support for the Assad regime, Hezbollah MP Ali Ammar said the attack “clearly bears the fingerprint of the Israeli enemy and its tools” (*Daily Star* [Beirut], July 10).

Hezbollah’s intervention on the side of pro-regime forces in Syria is viewed by many Lebanese as a direct violation of the Ba’abda Declaration, a 2012 agreement between Lebanon’s rival March 8 and March 14 political coalitions that sought to preserve peace in Lebanon by keeping the nation out of “regional and international conflicts and sparing it the negative repercussions of regional tensions and crises” (*Daily Star* [Beirut], February 20).

Many political factions in Lebanon were also alarmed by reports of Hezbollah’s participation in Lebanese Army operations against a Salafist extremist group in Sidon during a two-day battle over June 22 – 23. The incident began when militants under the

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command of Shaykh Ahmad al-Assir ambushed a Lebanese Army outpost in the Abra neighborhood of Sidon on June 22, killing 18 soldiers and wounding over 50 with a reported loss of 28 Salafist gunmen. Al-Assir is a vocal opponent of Hezbollah's military support of the Assad regime in Syria and counts among his followers Fadl Shaker (a.k.a. Fadl Abd al-Rahman Shamandar), a former well-known pop-singer who renounced non-Islamic music to join al-Assir's movement in 2011. Contrary to earlier reports that al-Assir and Shaker had been killed in the battle, two burned bodies believed to have belonged to the men were proven to be those of other militants following DNA testing and warrants were issued for the arrest of al-Assir and Shaker (al-Manar TV, July 3).

An independent Beirut daily claimed that the people of Sidon were convinced that the June 22-23 Abra action was "a military intelligence operation run by Hezbollah in collusion with the Lebanese Armed Forces" (*Sada al-Balad* [Beirut], July 3). The Sunni Lebanese Association of Muslim Scholars issued a statement maintaining that Hezbollah was not only involved in the Abra battle, but may have precipitated it: "It has been proved through facts, pictures, and the testimonies of the people of Sidon that the supporters of the party of Iran [i.e. Hezbollah] and the thugs of the Resistance Battalions joined the Lebanese Army in attacking the Bilal Bin-Rabah Mosque and its environs" (*Saida Gate* [Sidon], June 29).

Lebanese Minister of Defense Fayiz Ghunni insists that Hezbollah did not fight in Sidon, adding that the Lebanese Army has difficulty securing the border with Syria due to its obligation to deploy 15,000 troops in southern Lebanon in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1701 (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], July 1).

Prominent MP Ahmad Fatfat, a member of Sa'ad Hariri's Taysir al-Mustaqbal (Future Movement, part of the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition), complained in mid-June that the Lebanese Army had "begun to fall under the influence of Hezbollah," claiming that Hezbollah fighters were able to pass freely through army checkpoints along the Syrian border (*Daily Star* [Beirut], June 16). Solidifying its partnership with the Lebanese army is important to Hezbollah, which is mindful of the possibility that Israel may take advantage of its Syrian distraction to take another shot at eliminating the Shiite movement after being repulsed in a previous attempt in 2006. Israeli Combat Intelligence teams are busy monitoring Hezbollah movements and seeking Hezbollah targets along the border region for use in the eventuality of a renewed conflict (*Jerusalem Post*, June 28).

Potential Lebanese Army cooperation with Hezbollah raises a dilemma for the United States, a firm supporter of the army

but a dedicated opponent of Hezbollah. On a recent visit to Lebanon, U.S. deputy secretary of state William J. Burns condemned Hezbollah's role in the Syrian conflict, saying: "Despite its membership in the Lebanese government, Hezbollah has decided to put its own interests and those of its foreign backers above those of the Lebanese people" (*Daily Star* [Beirut], July 1).

Reports that Hezbollah was also experiencing differences over domestic issues with General Michel Aoun, the leader of al-Taysir al-Watani al-Hurr (The Free Patriotic Movement) and the March 8 political coalition, came to a head on July 10, when Shiite Amal leader Nabih Berri announced the withdrawal of the two Shiite parties (Amal and Hezbollah) from the coalition, which is otherwise composed of Christians, socialists and a number of small Sunni parties. According to Berri, the relatively amicable split will not disrupt coordination on foreign policy: "We agree with Aoun on strategic issues such as the Resistance and [the stand on] Israel but not on domestic issues" (*Daily Star* [Beirut], July 10). One of the main points of contention between the two factions of the now defunct March 8 coalition was the reappointment of General Jean Kahwaji as Lebanese Army chief, a move opposed by General Aoun and many others who suspect the general of being sympathetic to Hezbollah. The split comes as Lebanon attempts to form a new government this month under premier-designate Tammam Salam, who has already rejected Hezbollah's demand for a veto over new government decisions (Naharnet [Beirut], July 3).

With Hezbollah under intense criticism from a wide range of political opponents, the movement has undertaken a new media offensive designed to use senior members to clarify the movement's understanding of its role in Lebanon, its determination to combat "takfiri" extremists in Syria or Lebanon and its willingness to re-engage with all Islamic movements (*al-Safir* [Beirut], July 3). However, existing sectarian divisions within Lebanon mean Hezbollah will have trouble convincing non-Shiite Lebanese of the desirability of the movement turning its arms on fellow Lebanese (even takfiri extremists), while justifying its support of the Assad regime in Syria will prove even more difficult given the wide unpopularity of the Syrian government in many parts of Lebanon. Hezbollah's main intention is to preserve the anti-Israeli "Resistance" movement through these difficulties, though the collapse of the March 8 coalition may be an early sign of emerging splits within the Resistance.

LIBYA'S FIRST BERBER LEADER DESCRIBES SECURITY SITUATION IN LIBYA

Andrew McGregor

Nuri Abu Sahmain, the new chairman of Libya's ruling body, the General National Congress (GNC), is the first member of Libya's minority Amazigh (or Berber) community to lead the nation. A surprise choice for the post, Abu Sahmain replaces Muhammad Yusuf al-Magariief, who fell victim to Libya's controversial new "political isolation law," which prohibits former members of the Qaddafi regime (including ex-diplomats like al-Magariief) from holding political office. Formally unaffiliated to any political party, Abu Sahmain sits as an independent in the GNC but is considered a member of a religiously conservative bloc within the GNC formed earlier this year under the banner of Loyalty to Martyrs' Blood (North Africa Journal, February 21).

The new GNC leader hails from the largely Berber town of Zuwara (Tamurt n Wat Willul in Berber) in the coast region of western Libya. Natives of the town speak a dialect of Berber known as Zuwara Berber and are mainly (but not exclusively) members of the Ibadi sect of Islam, which many orthodox Arab Muslims regard as an unorthodox branch of the religion that developed as an offshoot of the much-despised and long-eliminated Kharijite Islamic movement. However, Abu Sahmain's largest group of supporters in the vote for a new GNC chief came from the highly orthodox Muslim Brotherhood's Hizb al-Adala wa'l-Bina (Justice and Development Party), leading to suspicion that Abu Sahmain was an ally, if not a member, of Libya's Muslim Brotherhood. In response to these suspicions, Abu Sahmain has denied being a member of the Brotherhood, but notes that: "The ties that link me to all the parties, whether Muslim Brothers or others, are the constants of building this homeland. If such constants connect me to the Muslim Brothers or the National Forces Alliance or any other party, then I am honored to have such connections... I have never joined any party in my life" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 30).

The new GNC leader will also have to face accusations from Libya's largely Arab or Arabized society that he will use his appointment to "Berberize" Libya. Sahmain has sought to ward off such suspicions while being clear he will not miss this chance to restore the Berber language and ethnicity that were targeted for extinction by Mu'ammar Qaddafi, who once described claims that Berbers even existed in Libya as "colonialist propaganda" (Jana [Tripoli], June 2, 2010). According to Sahmain:

If the Amazigh language is one of the tools to unify this

homeland, we are proud of this culture and language... However, the rumors that are being spread by some that it is one way of planting an ethnic culture is not in the culture of our magnanimous people... Libya is united in Islam and the homeland; it is united in the Amazigh and Arab cultures... The Amazigh language was fought [against] in this country and marginalized by the [Qaddafi] regime. It would be our national duty if we find a way to enable those who wish to learn it or to help the state in spreading this culture (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 30).

GNC First Deputy Speaker Dr. Jum'ah Atiqah described concerns surrounding the selection of a Berber for GNC chairman as being "absolutely baseless, and this selection is considered as an indicator of positive change in Libya" (Gnc.gov.ly, June 25).

While acknowledging ongoing security difficulties within Libya, Abu Sahmain remains optimistic the situation can be reversed and points out that the existing problems do not pose an existential threat to the Libyan state: "Surprises may occur in a specific area once in a while. Things may happen in Tripoli or Benghazi or in the south. However, they are all under the control of the state. They have not caused us insecurity at the level of national security." The new GNC chairman claims to travel back and forth from Zuwarra to Tripoli in his own vehicle and without bodyguards (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 30).

Though many observers might describe lawless armed militias, Islamist terrorists or tribal rivalries as the greatest security threats in Libya, Abu Sahmain maintains that the real threat to Libya comes from supporters of the deposed Qaddafi regime operating both within the country and in foreign refuges: "They are trying to spread chaos and lack of public reassurance. They are trying to gain positions or make some citizens feel that Libya is not calm." Pressed by a skeptical reporter to provide names of such plotters (given that most major members of the former regime are dead or under detention), Abu Sahmain declined to give names, but suggested somewhat vaguely that: "We have intelligence information; in fact, we have specific names. The information we have has led to the arrest of several groups in several towns; they are under investigation" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 30).

One of Abu Sahmain's most important tasks will be to oversee the drafting of a new Libyan constitution, a process necessary for the nation's political evolution, but one that will be the subject of numerous disputes between religious and political factions. Libya's largest political coalition, Mahmoud Jibril's

National Forces Alliance (NFA), declared on July 4 that it was boycotting GNC sessions to protest the delays in forming a new constitution, a task that is to be completed by 60 delegates yet to be elected by Libyan voters (Ammun News [Amman], July 5). Libya's Rafd (Rejection) movement, which claims a mass following, has promised Egyptian-style mass protests to topple the GNC if it fails to make significant progress by October 30 (*al-Jadidah* [Tripoli], July 4). Abu Sahmain has already suggested postponing the vote until 2014, claiming that "Public opinion accepts what is necessitated by the national duty" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 30).

Abu Sahmain will inherit another set of headaches in his new role as official commander-in-chief of Libya's nascent armed forces, which are still struggling to create a professional national army from the raw material of highly-politicized and well-armed militias that typically take direction from the government when it suits them and besiege government buildings when it does not. Sahmain's election comes at a time when acting Libyan chief-of-staff General Salim al-Qinaydi is feuding with Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, accusing the government of interfering in military affairs and threatening to bring the army into the streets if the government does not expand the Defense Ministry's budget (*al-Jadidah* [Tripoli], June 25; June 27).

Turkey's Counterterrorism Response to the Syrian Crisis

Jennifer Lang

Turkey has faced a relatively limited but consistent threat from jihadist militants linked to al-Qaeda dating back to the 1980s/90s, particularly following the return of Turkish fighters from Afghanistan (*Hurriyet*, October, 2001). The 2003 Istanbul bombings that resulted in over 60 fatalities triggered a major crackdown on suspected jihadists that led to the official conclusion that "the main body of the terrorist organization [al-Qaeda in Turkey] has been dismantled." [1]

The numerous foiled plots and raids connected to al-Qaeda cells in Turkey signal the considerable capacity of Turkish security forces seasoned in countering terrorism. The ongoing conflict in Syria, however, adds an unexpected element to Turkish (in)security and the types of threats authorities will have to counter in coming years.

Al-Qaeda does not consider Turkey a priority target and will therefore continue to focus efforts on Syria via Jabhat al-Nusrah (JaN). However, Turkey's border provinces present an increasingly complex environment in which Turkish

authorities may struggle to maintain control. The border runs for 560 miles and remains easy to traverse despite additional security at border points.

The presence in this region of Syrian opposition forces, refugees, local jihadist and Salafist groups, al-Qaeda-associated groups such as JaN, Kurdish nationalists and Turkey's Alawite and Alevi populations all contribute to a situation that is volatile and has the potential to significantly deteriorate as the conflict in Syria drags on. The establishment of long-term jihadist networks in the border region presents a serious concern, although is outweighed by the potential for widespread sectarian conflict spilling over into Turkey.

Turkish nationals who fought in both Iraq and Afghanistan later returned to Turkey establishing cells focused primarily on support activities such as recruitment and fundraising. In October 2012, the U.S. State Department asserted that al-Qaeda elements in Iran, led by the financier Muhsin al-Fadhli, were moving fighters and funds through Turkey to Syria (*Today's Zaman*, October 19, 2012). Turkey's geographical position made it a key transit state for jihadists travelling to Afghanistan and Iraq, a factor that now also extends to its southern neighbor, Syria.

Meanwhile, Ayman al-Zawahiri has directly referenced Turkey in official messaging, noting the cooperation of the ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP - Justice and Development Party) with Israel as well as its alleged fight "against Islam and Shari'a" as points of contention. [2] According to intercepted courier communications, discussions between Osama bin Laden and Habib Akdas, the leader and founder of al-Qaeda in Turkey, similarly referenced such issues as justification for the 2003 Istanbul attacks. [3]

Over the past ten years, plots involving jihadists with varying degrees of affiliation to al-Qaeda have included:

- A 2004 plot to attack the NATO Summit in Istanbul;
- A 2005 plot to attack an Israeli cruise ship in Antalya;
- A 2008 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul that resulted in three fatalities;
- A 2011 plot to attack the Incirlik Air Base (used by the United States to send supplies to Iraq and Afghanistan);
- Plots in 2011 and 2013 to attack the U.S. Embassy in Ankara.

Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition appears to have been based initially on humanitarian concerns as well as the underlying assumption that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad will not remain in power. This has further extended to lending support to the force it believes has the best shot at maintaining Syria's territorial integrity and as an extension, the most likely to be able to stem the growing tide of sectarian tension. The jihadist threat to Turkey *vis-à-vis* Syria comes in the form of local groups; al-Qaeda affiliated Syrian groups

(namely JaN); and foreign jihadists.

Support for local jihadist and Salafist groups somewhat fits within Turkey's wider strategy, particularly as some maintain links to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian Islamic Front. Such groups include Ghorba'a al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham. Ghorba'a al-Sham is a local jihadist group which often aligns with the JaN and consists mainly of Turks; Ahrar al-Sham is not a jihadist group but is considered a hardline Salafist group. Turkey has agreed to funnel all military aid through the opposition's Supreme Joint Military Command; however, this agreement is in an early stage and the reality is that many informal funding routes still exist. [4] Although these fighters do not necessarily share al-Qaeda's desire to establish a global Islamic caliphate, support for hardline groups nonetheless feeds into wider sectarian tensions in the area and could contribute to the formation of long-term jihadist networks.

Clashes in the border areas between opposition forces and Kurdish nationalists, including members of the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD - Democratic Union Party), Syria's largest Kurdish organization, have prompted claims that Turkish support for local jihadist groups is based on its desire to squash Kurdish influence in northern Syria amid fears of a breakaway Kurdish state. Fierce battles in Ras al-Ayn (Syria's northernmost city, close to the Turkish border) between the PYD, Ghorba'a al-Sham and the JaN in November, 2012 focused further attention on Turkey's motives in the conflict (Naharnet, November 22, 2012). While the PYD has now brokered a ceasefire with the FSA, Ghorba'a al-Sham maintains control over the nearest border checkpoint and the extent to which the more hardline groups will adhere to such agreements remains to be seen.

Several Turkish media sources reported the foiling of a plot in the southern town of Adana on May 31 that allegedly involved members of JaN and the nerve agent, Sarin. A Turkish daily reported that targets included the Incirlik air base and the Turkish border town of Gaziantep (*Sabah*, May 31). Another source stated that the nerve agent had been brought across the border from Syria (*Radikal*, May 31). However, Adana's Mayor, Hüseyin Avni Coş denied the presence of Sarin gas in a May 30 official statement to the state-run Anatolia News Agency and refused to comment on the suspects' organizational affiliations. There is no evidence to suggest that JaN is receiving direct support from the Turkish government (not surprising given the contrasting views of either side); although it also seems unlikely that the group would choose to target a major supporter of the opposition – a move that could precipitate a major security clampdown in the border provinces and restrictions on military and financial aid to the rebels. The lack of reporting since May 31 seems to confirm that the initial reports were not credible and failed to indicate that JaN presented a direct threat to Turkey.

The presence of foreign jihadists in Syria has arguably been exaggerated, particularly in the West. Nonetheless, the arrest of four Belgian citizens on the Turkish border in June clearly highlights the challenge faced by Western countries in deterring their citizens from attempting to join foreign jihadist groups (*Hurriyet*, June 19). For Turkey, such fighters are unlikely to pose a direct threat given that their objective is to reach the conflict zone, although it does contribute to sectarian tensions in Turkey's border region and the development of jihadist networks.

The Belgian case was brought to rest by "excellent cooperation" between the Turkish and Belgian police, however, in other instances, Syrian opposition forces have themselves dealt with foreign jihadists. Late last year, the raising of al-Qaeda's black flag above the Bab al-Hawa border crossing by foreign fighters prompted a bitter fight with Islamist fighters from the al-Farouq brigade as well as the FSA (*al-Akhabar*, October 3).

It is true that Syria, rather than Turkey, remains a priority for al-Qaeda and its affiliates as it presents a critical opportunity for the group to reassert its relevance following perceptions that it failed to respond appropriately to popular uprisings elsewhere in the region. In this context, Turkey will most likely remain a recruitment and support base for jihadists, particularly in the border areas.

Of greater concern is the impact of the Syrian conflict in fueling sectarianism, an aspect which could be perceived as having been fueled by Turkish support for hardline groups that have stoked tensions with Turkish Alawites and Alevis, as well as with Syrian Kurds. This will present a much longer-term and complex challenge for the Turkish government and its security forces over the coming years, as a solution to the crisis in Syria remains improbable in the near to medium term.

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Notes

1. See: Turkish National Police, 2012, http://www.turkishnationalpolice.gov.tr/AL_QAEDA.html.
2. See: "Message to the Muslim Turkish People," as-Sahab Media, August 15, 2010, at <http://jihadology.net/2010/08/16/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-presents-message-to-the-people-of-turkey-by-dr-ayman-al-zawahri/>, *Today's*

Zaman, February 24, 2010; al-Jazeera, August 15, 2010.
 3. See: S. Ozeren, I. Dincer Gunes and D. M. al-Badayneh, *Understanding Terrorism: Analysis of Sociological and Psychological Aspects*, Lancaster, UK, 2007, p.287.
 4. See: <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2013/05/14/63221/the-structure-and-organization-of-the-syrian-opposition/>.

China Claims Uyghur Militants Trained in Syria

Jacob Zenn

The Chinese government has claimed since 2012 that Uyghur militants from Xinjiang are fighting with the rebels in Syria against the government of Bashar al-Assad (*Global Times* [Beijing], October 29, 2012). On July 1, China said that a Uyghur militant who studied in Istanbul and fought with the Free Syrian Army in Aleppo had returned to Xinjiang and was arrested while planning to carry out “violent attacks” in China (*Global Times*, July 1).

China is not only concerned that the civil war in Syria will foster greater instability in the Middle East, but also that Uyghur “foreign fighters” in Syria may return home. Their ties to international militants in Syria will further internationalize the Xinjiang issue among international jihadists and provide the Uyghur fighters with new combat skills that they can use to carry out attacks in Xinjiang.

The Chinese reports of Uyghur militants returning to Xinjiang from Syria come amid a wave of violent incidents in Xinjiang:

- On March 7, five people were killed in a fight between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in an arcade in the commercial district of Korla (Radio Free Asia, March 7; *South China Morning Post*, March 8).
- On March 9, a group of unidentified men attacked a police station with a petrol bomb in Hotan (Radio Free Asia, March 12).
- On April 23, 21 people were killed in Kashgar after a community patrol uncovered a group of Uyghurs making explosives (*China Daily*, April 30).
- On June 26, as many as 47 people were killed in Turpan when a group of about 15 Uyghurs attacked a police station and other buildings with daggers and petrol bombs (*China Daily*, July 8).
- On June 28, in Hotan, as many as 15 Uyghurs were killed after the police broke up a sermon at a mosque and

arrested the imam, which led to large protests in a town’s main square (Radio Free Asia, June 30).

Notably, the late June attacks in Xinjiang preceded the fourth anniversary of the July 5, 2009 ethnic riots in Xinjiang’s capital, Urumqi, in which more than 200 Uyghurs and Han Chinese were killed. Those riots, which led China to impose a nearly year-long communications blackout in Xinjiang, pushed Xinjiang into the international spotlight, particularly for Middle Eastern Islamists and Turks, who are ethnically and linguistically related to the Uyghurs. Within weeks of the 2009 riots, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood compared Chinese policies towards the Uyghurs to President Hosni Mubarak’s policies towards Egypt’s Muslims, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said China was “almost committing genocide” in Xinjiang and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) threatened to target Chinese interests in northwest Africa (*Hurriyet*, July 10, 2009; Ikhwanonline.com, July 11, 2009; *Global Times*, July 16, 2009).

In August 2009, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) issued a video describing the “Chinese regime” in the same way al-Qaeda describes the “Zionist regime” in Israel. [1] In October 2009, al-Qaeda’s as-Sahab media wing also produced a video of Abu Yahya al-Libi discussing Xinjiang as the Muslim World’s “Forgotten Wound.” [2] Only the AQI video showed support for the Uyghur-led Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which operates with al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Pakistan. The TIP claims to have carried out attacks in Afghanistan, but its goal is independence for “East Turkistan” (Xinjiang) and the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate across Central Asia.

TIP leader Abdullah Mansur has thus far claimed only the April 23 attack in Kashgar, saying in a Uyghur language video statement that “the jihad operation” was in response to “Chinese Communists” killing and imprisoning Islamic teachers and scholars, the “domination” of Uyghurs by Chinese culture and the banning of Islamic headscarves for women and beards for men. [3]

In the March edition of *Islamic Turkistan*, which the TIP has published with Mansur as its editor since 2008, the TIP claimed responsibility for a motorcycle-borne suicide attack in Yecheng, Xinjiang on October 1, 2012 that killed 21 border guards (*Islamic Turkistan*, March 2013; Radio Free Asia, October 12, 2012). Yecheng is 150 miles north of Xinjiang’s border with Pakistan and was also the site of an attack in February 2012, in which a group of Uyghurs killed up to 24 civilians in a commercial area frequented by Han Chinese (al-Jazeera, February 29, 2012). In 2011, the TIP also provided video evidence of its responsibility for an attack on

Han pedestrians in Kashgar on July 30, 2011, which killed more than ten people and resembled the attack on National Day in Yecheng in 2012. [4]

The TIP implied it was involved in the Syrian conflict in its magazine: “If China has the right to support Assad in Syria, we have the right to support our Muslim Syrians” (*Islamic Turkistan*, March 2013). There is, however, only visual evidence of one “Chinese fighter” in Syria. This individual, who appears to be ethnically Uyghur, is shown leading a prayer while rebels repair a missile in a March YouTube video posted by the user “Al-Nusrah Front.” [5]

Chinese estimates of as many as 30 to 100 Uyghurs who received military training in Pakistan and went to Turkey to join the Syrian rebels are likely overstated (*The Hindu*, July 1; *Global Times*, July 1). However, there are more than 20,000 Uyghurs in Turkey and Turkey-based Uyghur organizations (including the East Turkistan Educational and Solidarity Association, which China claims is sending Uyghurs into Syria) are providing humanitarian support to the Syrian people (Maarip.org, February 13). It is likely that some Uyghurs have transited Turkey to fight in Syria.

Regardless of the total number of Uyghurs in Syria, a direct Syrian or TIP connection to the unrest in Xinjiang in 2013 is unlikely. Many violent incidents in Xinjiang appear to arise spontaneously and stem from disputes over local issues, such as the razing of traditional Uyghur villages for new development projects and the dilution of the Uyghur character of Xinjiang due to Han in-migration from eastern China. Nonetheless, the role of jihadist videos in inspiring attackers and the similarity in attacks, which often feature vehicles ramming into Han civilians, protests preceding attacks on police stations and suicide operations using bicycles or carts, suggest that some militant groups in Xinjiang are in coordination with each other and the TIP. Notably, a series of TIP videos released in July, 2013 called “Military Quick Guides” are intended to train viewers in the use of arms, such as Tokarev pistols and AK-47s, but thus far attacks in Xinjiang have not employed guns, possibly because of the inability of militants to acquire them. [6]

In addition to the Uyghurs, there are also a number of other Central Asians and Caucasus natives fighting in Syria:

- Uzbeks are commonly seen by traffickers helping rebels enter Syria from Turkey, and one Uzbek led an Islamist brigade in Aleppo in 2012 (AFP, December 9, 2012; *Guardian*, July 30, 2012).
- Kyrgyzstan reported in April that around 15 youths from southern Kyrgyzstan, including ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbeks,

and Tajiks, traveled to Turkey to fight in Syria (Interfax, April 19; Voice of Russia, April 20).

- There are an unknown number of Tajik fighters in Syria, though they may number greater than any other Central Asian contingent. Three Tajiks were killed in Syria in May (RFE/RL, May 24).
- Kazakhstan reported that eight of its citizens were arrested in June while seeking to secure funds to travel to Syria to fight with the rebels (Interfax, June 5).
- Finally, there are as many as 250 Russian citizens in Syria, including Muslim Tatars and Chechens, the latter of which have led the “immigrant brigades” in northern Syria that recruited into their ranks a Han Chinese convert to Islam, Yusuf al-Sini, who was featured in a rebel YouTube video in March 2013 (Segondya.ru, March 7; Ansar al-Mujahideen, March 17). [7]

The preceding analysis leads to three main conclusions. First, the existence of Uyghurs and Central Asian fighters in Syria shows that the “foreign fighter” issue in Syria is not only a European issue – as often reported – but rather one that affects Central Asia and other regions as well. Second, TIP videos and Uyghur fighters in Syria will likely lead to further internationalization of the Uyghur issue among international jihadists and will introduce jihadist ideology to disaffected Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Finally, Chinese reports about Syrian fighters returning to Xinjiang may be intended to convince the West that its support of the rebels in Syria in tandem with the Gulf States will lead to even worse unintended consequences than did the West’s military intervention in Libya.

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Notes

1. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbNaAJzunR4>.
2. For video, see: <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1094>; Transcript available at: <http://triceratops.brynmaur.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10066/5066/AYL20091007.pdf?sequence=3>.
3. Sawt al-Islam, June 27, 2013, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=205068>.
4. Sawt al-Islam, October 15, 2011, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=131544>.
5. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HTUHsQhMOY.

6. Sawt al-Islam, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?p=569470>.

7. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maccGe9MSMY>.

Sinai Insurgency Exploits Political Crisis in Egypt

Andrew McGregor

The growing confidence of Islamist militants operating in the volatile Sinai region of Egypt was displayed on July 10, when gunmen made an audacious attempt to assassinate General Ahmad Wasfy, the commander of Egypt's Second Field Army, which is responsible for the Sinai (Ahram Online [Cairo], July 10). Militants have taken advantage of the newfound operational space created by the collapse of Egypt's security infrastructure that accompanied the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak two years ago. The Egyptian Army's latest takeover of the country and arrest of Muslim Brotherhood political leader Muhammad al-Mursi has provided even more opportunities for Salafist-Jihadist groups in the Sinai to exploit Egypt's internal political crises in their own interests.

Dr. Muhammad Beltagy, a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood, told reporters on July 8 that the Brotherhood "doesn't control what is happening on the ground [in Sinai]... These attacks will stop the second [Defense Minister General Abd al-Fatah] al-Sisi retracts this coup, corrects the situation and when President Mursi returns to his authorities and duties" (*Daily News Egypt*, July 8). When opposition media used the statement to portray the Brotherhood as the engineers of the violence in Sinai, Beltagy issued a statement complaining that the media had been taken over by intelligence agencies who "cut-and-pasted" his words to make it appear he was the mastermind of the incidents in the Sinai (IkhwanWeb, July 10). In fact, the Muslim Brotherhood has never been able to establish a firm political base in the Sinai despite efforts to provide social services to the local population. Despite this, a prominent North Sinai activist, Mosa'ad Abu Fajr, has accused individuals associated with Hamas and its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, of supporting the violence in Sinai with funds provided by the now detained deputy leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Khayrat al-Shater (Ahram Online, July 5).

Hamas and the Collapse of the Islamist Government in Egypt

Israeli sources claim that dozens of Hamas militants crossed into the Sinai and participated in a Muslim Brotherhood

attack on the Egyptian Army post in al-Arish (*Arutz Sheva* [Tel Aviv], July 8). An earlier report that 30 militants had crossed into the Sinai in June was denied by the Gaza Interior Ministry, which described the report as "fabricated" and designed to add to "the chain of instigation against Gaza and its elected [Hamas] government" (Ikhwan Online [Cairo], June 17). However, a Palestinian-based news agency reported receiving confirmation of the infiltration from Egyptian security sources, who said the militants had set up fortified positions in the desert region around Jabal al-Halal in central Sinai (Ma'an News Agency, June 17). Egyptian border guards encountered a group of ten militants emerging from a tunnel from Gaza into the Sinai on July 7. The group, described as suspected Hamas fighters, managed to escape back into the tunnel but left behind seven boxes of bombs and munitions (*al-Ahram* [Cairo], July 7).

Hamas has been bitterly disappointed by the failure of the Islamist experiment in Egypt, which was expected to provide Hamas with diplomatic and financial support in its struggle with Israel. Instead, Hamas has encountered growing levels of popular opposition and media criticism in Egypt, with rumors sweeping the country that Hamas fighters are being smuggled into Egypt to restore the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nonetheless, the Hamas premier of Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, tried to inject some optimism into a grim situation in a July 5 sermon: "Egypt is behind us, as are the Arab and Islamic countries... We believe good will emerge from this Arab Spring, these revolutions and this rebirth. We expect the Arab Spring cycle to continue until its objectives are attained, including our own cause" (AFP, July 6).

The Israeli Response to Deteriorating Security in the Sinai

Explosions were reported in the Israeli port of Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba during the night of July 4, though investigations did not find direct evidence of a rocket attack. The alleged missile strike on Eilat was claimed in a statement issued the next day by the Jama'at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (the Group of Supporters of Jerusalem). [1] Eilat was last targeted by rockets fired from the Sinai by suspected Gaza militants in April. Former Israeli Defense Force (IDF) chief-of-staff General Gabi Ashkenazi warned that even if Mursi's overthrow did not present a direct threat to Israel, some risk could be generated from the Sinai where Islamists might use the opportunity to exploit the limited Egyptian military presence to strike Israel (*Jerusalem Post*, July 5).

For now, the IDF has adopted a policy of allowing Egyptian security forces to take care of armed individuals or groups spotted in the border region, taking action only if gunmen

proceed to cross the border (*Haaretz* [Tel Aviv], July 7). According to the commander of the Israel Caracal Battalion, currently deployed along the Sinai border, Israeli forces are working “on the assumption that an attack will happen... We’re preparing the soldiers for complex tasks, drilling extreme scenarios and doing all we can to give them the tools to deal with the situation. Terrorism in Sinai is growing stronger. We have to prepare” (*Jerusalem Post*, June 27). The Egyptian Army is well aware of the dangers posed by Sinai militants to Egypt’s current relationship with Israel and is reported to have moved quickly to make its position clear to Israel authorities by receiving an Israel representative for talks in Cairo with Egyptian security and intelligence officials only hours after Mursi’s overthrow (*Yediot Aharonot* [Tel Aviv], July 5). Nevertheless, suspicion and anxiety still permeate the post-overthrow climate, with Israel warning its nationals to avoid popular resorts in the Sinai and Egypt proceeding with the detention and trial of a number of individuals accused of spying for Israeli intelligence in the Sinai.

Jihadi Groups in the Sinai

Already well-populated with various jihadist groups incorporating both Gazan militants and Egyptian Islamists, Sinai has been targeted by two Salafi-Jihadist groups since the Mursi overthrow.

On July 5, a group using the name Ansar al-Shari’a in the Land of Kinaanah (i.e. Egypt) issued a founding statement promising to respond to the “war against Islam in Egypt,” a war waged by “secularists, atheists, Mubarak loyalists, Christians, security forces and the leaders of the Egyptian Army.” The statement describes democracy as “blasphemous” in its assumption of a prerogative of God and warns of impending “massacres of Muslims in Egypt” that could turn the country into “another Andalusia” (i.e. a nation in which all Muslims are expelled). [2]

A day later, a statement issued by al-Salafiya al-Jihadiyah fi’l-Sinai condemned the military for allegedly opening fire on demonstrators in al-Arish on July 5, warning that a return to the practices of the former regime was unacceptable. The statement went on to call for the “comprehensive and immediate application of Islamic law” and for Egyptians to abandon the concept of democracy and resist “the enemies of Islam in Egypt.” [3]

Christians are already being targeted by Islamist militants in the Sinai – on July 6 the priest of al-Arish’s Virgin Mary Church was murdered by motorcycle-riding gunmen and a Christian merchant in Shaykh Zuwayid was kidnapped (Middle East News Agency [Cairo], July 7). The militants are

infuriated by the very public role Coptic Pope Tawadros II played in supporting Mursi’s overthrow by the military. The Coptic activist Maspero Youth Union claims churches have been attacked across Egypt since the Army’s takeover (*al-Masry al-Youm*/Reuters, July 6).

Jihadi Operations in the Sinai Post al-Mursi

The intensity, mobility, coordination and apparent planning of militant strikes in the Sinai since the military’s removal of President al-Mursi demonstrate a growing sophistication and organization that has so far kept Egyptian security forces off-balance:

- Army checkpoints at al-Arish airport were attacked with rocket-propelled grenades on July 4 (Reuters, July 4; MENA, July 5). Gunmen in a 4x4 vehicle attacked an army checkpoint on the ring-road south of al-Arish on the same day (MENA [Cairo], July 4).
- Police stations and a military intelligence headquarters in Rafah (on the border with Gaza) have been attacked repeatedly by militants no doubt angered by Egyptian Army efforts to close more than forty major smuggling tunnels along the border. One soldier was killed and two police officers wounded in a July 4 attack on a Rafah police station and the Rafah border crossing was closed (Reuters, July 4). The next day, an Egyptian border guard was killed during a gunfight at the Ghornata checkpoint in North Sinai. A policeman was wounded by gunfire only hours later (Ahram Online, July 7).
- On July 5, a well-coordinated series of attacks took place in a number of towns in the North Sinai, demonstrating a growing ability to unite the diverse militant formations in the region in a single purpose. Angry Mursi supporters launched an assault on the local administrative building in al-Arish on July 5, waving the black flag of jihad (*al-rayat al-uqab* – The Banner of the Eagle) used by al-Qaeda and related movements (AFP, July 7). Two police officers were shot and killed in front of a government building in al-Arish the same day, with the number of policemen killed rising to six by the end of the day (Ahram Online, July 5; July 7; Reuters, July 7; July 8).
- Five security checkpoints were attacked simultaneously in Shaykh al-Zuwayid on July 5 (MENA, July 5). Four security checkpoints were again attacked simultaneously in the al-Zuhur neighborhood of Shaykh al-Zuwayid by militants in the evening of July 6-7, with gunfire being exchanged by security forces and gunmen in pickup trucks (Daily News Egypt, July 7; MENA, July 5; July 7).
- Militants also revived their attacks on the pipeline carrying Egyptian natural gas to Jordan with two strikes south of al-Arish on July 7 after ten months without

any pipeline attacks (MENA [Cairo], July 7). The attack resulted in the complete halt of natural gas supplies to Jordan, which is reliant on Egyptian energy sources (Petra [Amman], July 7).

- A gunman riding a motorcycle shot a police officer outside an al-Arish police station on July 8 (MENA, July 8). It was only one of a series of attacks carried out by mobile gunmen that day on police stations and security checkpoints. Fourteen suspected militants were arrested later in the day, with 12 individuals described by the military as “dangerous terrorists” having been located by an unmanned drone (Ma’an News Agency [Bethlehem], July 8).
- Islamist militants attacked a security checkpoint with RPGs and heavy machine guns at the village of Sadr al-Haytan on July 9 (Reuters, July 11).

Military Operations Planned for the Sinai

Egypt is currently coordinating a larger military presence in the Sinai with Israel. The size of the Egyptian military presence in different regions of the Sinai is closely regulated by the 1979 Camp David agreement and any unilateral deployment would create an immediate and heightened level of tension between the two countries. Annex 1 of the 1978 Camp David Accord divides the Sinai Peninsula into four zones running roughly north-south (Zones A to D), with the Egyptian security presence in each zone decreasing as they grow closer to the Israeli border. Any change to these deployments must be made with the agreement of the Israeli government, severely limiting Cairo’s ability to meet security challenges in the Sinai. The Egyptian military’s plan to deploy jet-fighters in the region to hunt terrorists and insurgents would be especially unacceptable to Israel without prior notice and approval. A July 2 statement released by the IDF said Egypt’s military efforts in the Sinai were being coordinated with the IDF and had been “authorized at the most senior levels in Israel” (Jerusalem Post, July 2). The expected Egyptian Army offensive in the Sinai is expected to be at least a month in length, with the military determined to eliminate the jihadist presence in the region (*al-Shuruq al-Jadid* [Cairo], July 6).

Conclusion

The volatility of the Sinai region and the danger of provocations leading to armed clashes between Egyptian and Israeli forces would be best dealt with by a stable state. Unfortunately, Egypt’s present instability provides ample opportunities for militants to exploit the political crisis for their own purposes. Militants can be expected to continue to take advantage of the fragile state of Egypt’s police and

Interior Ministry forces and the unpopularity of service in the Sinai. Coordinated attacks have effectively prevented security forces from coming to the aid of other posts under attack by militants and the possible infiltration of the region by foreign jihadist elements could easily precipitate a dangerous struggle for dominance in the peninsula.

Fueling this conflict is a steady flow of arms through the Sinai, some intended for use in the region with the rest destined for Gaza. Though some shipments are intercepted, there are indications that many of these cargoes continue to elude Egyptian police. On June 29, Egyptian security forces pursued two vehicles near Rafah. One vehicle escaped after an exchange of fire, but the second was found to be carrying five Grad rockets and an assortment of land mines, grenades and machine guns. Hours later, the North Sinai Security Inspector, Muhammad Hani, was pursued and killed by gunmen in a truck (MENA, June 29). In another incident, attackers in a July 5 assault on a Central Security Forces camp in Rafah were said to be using mortars, RPGs and Grinov heavy machine guns, the latter being a Soviet-era 7.62mm weapon likely obtained from Libya’s immense stocks of Soviet-made arms (MENA, July 5). Snipers using advanced firearms have also begun to take a deadly toll on exposed members of the security forces (Ma’an News Agency [Bethlehem], July 8). The current access to previously unattainable levels of firepower and their ability to find refuge in the Sinai’s mountains and deserts have emboldened the Sinai-based militants and will enable them to contest a time-constrained and militarily-limited Egyptian military offensive designed to wipe them out.

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Notes

1. “Firing Grad Rockets at the Occupied City of Umm Rishrash [Eilat],” Jama’at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, July 5, 2013, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46329>
2. “The Starting Statement: Ansar al-Shari’a in the Land of Kinaanah,” July 5, 2013, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46317>.
3. “Statement regarding the crime of Army personnel against the protestors in al-Arish,” al-Salafiya al-Jihadiya fi’l-Sinai, July 6, 2013, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46328>.