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OPERATION HURRICANE EXODUS: MEND THREATENS CHEVRON PRODUCTION IN NIGERIA

Andrew McGregor

Nigerian militants in the oil-rich Niger Delta have recently threatened American oil operations in that region as part of a larger campaign to bring Nigerian oil production to a halt by 2015.

According to the September 4 statement by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND):

MEND is so far satisfied with the steady destructive progress of 'Hurricane Exodus' which has reduced Nigeria's oil output significantly through our sustained sabotage of pipelines. We will also continue to turn a blind eye to the crude oil merchants passing through our territories because their activities, apart from toll paid us, is helping to achieve our objectives of zero oil output by 2015. We use this medium to advise workers at the Chevron Tank Farm in Escravos to evacuate the premises as mortar attacks are imminent on Tuesday, October 1, 2013 from 00:01 hour Nigerian time (*This Day* [Lagos], September 5).

The facility in question, the Escravos Terminal and Tank Farm, is based at the mouth of the Escravos River (a tributary of the Niger) at the Bight of Benin. The plant represents Chevron's main production facility in Nigeria and is a joint venture with the state-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Securing the Niger Delta oil industry from attacks or theft is a Herculean task – the field of pipelines covers an area of roughly 27,000 square miles (Bloomberg, March 6).

The selection of October 1 as the day attacks will begin is of significance to MEND

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as an organization as well as a warning of the seriousness of their intent. October 1 is Nigerian Independence Day and is the date in 2010 when two bombings claimed by MEND in the Nigerian capital Abuja killed 12 people and wounded scores of others. After the bombings, MEND leader Henry Okah attempted to take refuge in South Africa, but was instead detained and tried there, receiving a sentence of 24 years. Operation Hurricane Exodus (as mentioned in the September 4 statement) is the name of a campaign of sustained attacks launched by MEND on April 5 to punish Nigeria for providing what the movement alleged were forged documents used to help convict Okah (*Guardian* [Lagos], April 3). Days later, the movement claimed responsibility for the slaughter of 15 policemen in one of the creeks of Bayelsa State. The policemen had been providing security for the burial of the mother of a leading MEND militant (*Business Day* [Lagos], April 11; Sahara Reporters, April 23). Okah's release and those of "other innocent people" convicted of the bombings are among MEND's current demands.

The statement was signed by MEND "spokesman" Jomo Gbomo, a possibly fictitious persona used by MEND militants. Former MEND commander Reuben Wilson, now an advocate of the Nigerian government's amnesty program, claims that "Jomo Gbomo" does not exist "as a human being," but is rather a name he and others used for statements issued from the creeks of southern Nigeria (*This Day* [Lagos], September 11). With an estimated 30,000 former militants having taken advantage of the amnesty, including a number of senior commanders such as Wilson, MEND may now be in the hands of a younger generation of militants or criminals posing as ideologically motivated fighters in order to cloak extortion activities under the cover of environmental and social activism. It is possible that their ambition may exceed their experience and operational effectiveness, but MEND militants still hold a local advantage over security operatives in the labyrinthine creeks of the Niger Delta. MEND established they still posed a firm threat despite the amnesties when some 225 militants in 15 boats raided the oil facilities in Atlas Cove in Lagos in July, well beyond their normal operating zone within the Niger Delta. Three naval personnel were killed and much of the facility destroyed by dynamite (*Vanguard* [Lagos], July 13).

MEND followed its threats against Chevron with a more conciliatory message on September 9, in which the organization said it was ready to "end activities of illegitimate oil merchants, pipeline vandalization and the unrest in the Niger Delta region when the reason we took up arms is addressed by a listening administration" (UPI, September 10).

Current oil losses to vandals and saboteurs amount to roughly 150,000 barrels per day in the Delta, a significant loss but greatly diminished from the losses endured during the height of MEND's pre-amnesty activities, when production was reduced by nearly a third. Nigeria's oil industry currently provides about 80 percent of the state's budget. Rampant corruption in Nigeria means little of this revenue actually makes its way back to the Niger Delta communities that host the industry, encouraging extortion and oil theft as alternative revenue streams.

SINAI JIHADISTS RESPOND TO EGYPTIAN MILITARY OFFENSIVE WITH STATEMENTS AND SUICIDE BOMBS

Andrew McGregor

As the Egyptian military intensifies its campaign against militants and terrorists in the volatile but strategic Sinai Peninsula, their jihadist opponents have responded with a series of messages claiming the Army is using excessive force, destroying property and killing civilians. These statements of defiance have been backed up by several suicide attacks designed to dissuade Egypt's security forces from pursuing the complete elimination of the various Salafi-Jihadi groups operating in the Sinai.

In a statement released on September 4, al-Salafiya al-Jihadiya fi Sinai disputed the reported arrests of al-Qaeda leaders in the Sinai, calling such reports "lies and silly fabrications" designed to "cover up the acts of treachery and betrayal committed by the Egyptian army blatantly and the crimes committed against the people of Sinai." [1] The Salafist movement accused Egyptian authorities of borrowing methods used by the Israelis on the Palestinian population and acting under Israeli direction in targeting homes and mosques in the Sinai as well as demolishing other homes to create a buffer zone at the Rafah border point. The statement condemns in particular the shelling of the Abi Munir mosque in al-Muqata'a village (near the town of Shaykh Zuwayid). The movement says Egyptian troops fire indiscriminately, killing and wounding innocent parties, acts which make the Egyptian military "an assaulting apostate sect which should be deterred and repelled and this is what the mujahideen are doing every day with operations that are burning and breaking their forces."

A September 11 statement by the Jama'at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis militant group said the stated goal of the Egyptian Army in the Sinai, the liquidation of criminal and terrorist elements,

was only a screen for its real purpose – the creation of a buffer zone “to protect Jews from any threats from militants in the Sinai and to prevent any strikes of the mujahideen against the Jews.” [2] The statement goes on to accuse the Egyptian Army of mounting its own campaign of terrorism and intimidation in the region through random shelling, arson, the destruction of wells, looting, indiscriminate fire and the repeated targeting of mosques without justification. All these acts are committed with the intention of serving “the interests of the Jews and to preserve their security.” The Egyptian Army has thus aligned itself with “the enemies of God and the enemies of Islam.”

A second communiqué issued by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis on September 15 decried the “displacement and terrorism launched by the Egyptian Army on the people of the Sinai” and claimed that the Army had committed a massacre of seven named civilians (including four children under seven years-of-age) who were killed by shellfire or under the treads of one of the 30 tanks the movement says the Army used to attack their village on the morning of September 13. [3] The statement claims the attack’s objective was to prevent the mujahideen from attacking commercial centers in Israel from the Sinai and was carried out on the orders of the American Army. The movement promised a “painful response” to the Egyptian Army’s “criminality and apostasy.”

The Egyptian Army’s use of armor, Apache helicopters and 20,000 troops to strike alleged terrorist refuges in the Sinai marks the greatest Egyptian military concentration in the region since the 1973 Ramadan War with Israel. Though the campaign was initially stated to have the purpose of eliminating radical Salafist jihadi organizations in the Sinai, the Army has expanded its mandate to include daily raids on homes believed to belong to opponents of July’s military coup (Mubasher Misr, September 13). The campaign is expected to last six months.

In an unusual development, but one that reflects the growing security cooperation between Israel and the Egyptian military, a delegation of Israeli security officials arrived in Cairo on a private jet on September 11 to discuss security issues in the Sinai with their Egyptian counterparts (*Arutz Sheva*, September 12). A statement from the pro-Mursi National Alliance to Support Legitimacy said the meeting was intended to coordinate efforts with Israel to kill innocent civilians, destroy local agriculture, displace residents and demolish mosques, “just like the Israeli army in the occupied territories” (*Egypt Independent*, September 16).

The militants have attempted to fight back, offering armed resistance in the villages and a mix of car bombs and suicide

bombs to disrupt the Army’s campaign. Roughly 50 soldiers and policemen have been killed in the Sinai since July.

- In a September 5 “martyrdom operation,” a bomb went off in Nasr City as Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim’s convoy passed, though Ibrahim, the intended target, survived (Ahrām Online [Cairo], September 13). The group apologized to “Muslims in general and the relatives of the martyrs in particular” for its failure to kill Ibrahim, but promised further attacks would follow until this objective was achieved. The statement explained that the group was “working to establish the religion of Allah on Earth” while refusing to “take the road of pagan democracy.”
- On September 11, two car bombs targeted the military intelligence headquarters in Rafah and a nearby military checkpoint, killing six soldiers and the two suicide bombers. The attacks were claimed by Jund al-Islam (MENA/Ahrām Online [Cairo], September 7; AFP, September 13).
- On September 16 a bus carrying Central Security Force conscripts was hit by either a roadside bomb or an RPG, injuring seven conscripts (Ahrām Online, September 16).

Egyptian Army spokesman Colonel Ahmad Ali recently said the army had been surprised by the “sudden escalation in terrorist attacks” after the army took control of the country, though he denied the jihadists’ accusations the army had used excessive force in the campaign, remarking that if that was the case, “we would have finished terrorism off in 24 hours” (*Daily News Egypt*, September 15).

Notes

1. Al-Salafiya al-Jihadiya fi Sinai, “Lying Agents,” Fursan al-Balagh Media, September 4, 2013, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46874>.
2. Jama’at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, “The Egyptian Army – Criminality and Betrayal: Statement on the Extended Military Campaign against the People of the Sinai,” September 11, 2013, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46923>.
3. Jama’at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, “Second Statement on the Extended Military Campaign against the People of the Sinai,” September 15, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46962>.
4. Jama’at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, “Battle of Revenge for the Muslims of Egypt: Assassination Attempt of the Egyptian Interior Minister,” September 8, 2013, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46902>.

Syrian Jihadists React to the Threat of U.S. Military Intervention

Murad Batal al-Shishani

Various reservations have been raised by the opponents of a military action in Syria by Western countries against the Bashar al-Assad regime for its alleged use of chemical weapons. Perhaps the most common of these objections was the one linked to the presence of jihadists in the Syrian armed opposition, which has been fighting a civil war for more than two years now after peaceful protests became militarized in reaction to the regime's violent response. Many of those who oppose a military intervention in Syria suggested that the West, by planning a strike against the Assad regime, is standing by al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations. However, the jihadists who have made progress in the battlefields of Syria and control different parts of the country have become major players in today's Syria; therefore, understanding their positions regarding any future Western military action in Syria is important.

Though the Russian initiative to gather and destroy Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles under international supervision has reduced the chance of a military strike in the short-term, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry made it clear in an address to Congress that the administration still regarded limited military strikes as an option if the initiative fails to have results:

We have to continue to show Syria, Russia, and the world that we are not going to fall for stalling tactics. If the challenge we laid down is going to have the potential to become a real proposal, it is only because of the threat of force that we are discussing today...We are not talking about America going to war. President Obama is not asking for a declaration of war. We are not going to war. There will be no American boots on the ground... What we're talking about is a targeted, limited, but consequential action that will reinforce the prohibition against chemical weapons...We're talking about an action that will degrade Assad's capacity to use these weapons and to ensure that they do not proliferate. [1]

The initial reaction of the jihadists to what they described as an "anticipated Crusader strike" came from Abu Saad al-Amili, a strategist of the movement whose writings circulate widely on jihadist websites. Al-Amili, who posted his advice for jihadists through his Twitter account, considered that the any strike by the West would aim to "weaken" the Syrian regime but not "finish" it. He tweeted that the strike is designed to save face for the Western powers because the Syrian regime has defiantly used chemical weapons, therefore, according to al-Amili, the military strike would be limited and most importantly, it would target the jihadists

in the sense of "hitting two [targets] in one attack." Al-Amili believes that jihadists would be the "big target in order to blow up their infrastructure and to liquidate their leaders and soldiers easily." Al-Amili warned the jihadists: "Do not forget that the enemy is superior with its air force weaponry." The jihad strategist also reminded Syria's jihadists to learn lessons "from your brothers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali, taking into account your special geographical and military circumstances." He insisted that the West is primarily intended to keep the stalemate in Syria because "they fear the jihadists' progress." [2]

Another jihadist ideologue, Abdullah bin Muhammad, ruled out a large scale U.S. intervention in an interview posted on jihadist websites, but he predicts, like al-Amili, "disciplinary strikes" against the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons. Bin Muhammad thinks that the United States will resort to drone attacks against jihadists in Syria, claiming that the Americans have built one launching base in Jordan and intend to build another in Iraq soon. He thinks this U.S. strategy in Syria will be implemented when the fall of regime gets closer "to prevent Syria's jihadists from attacking Israel" after the collapse of the Assad regime. [3]

These assessments by jihadist ideologues regarding a potential military action against the Assad regime were echoed in jihadists' discussions on their forums and social media networks. Some reports even suggested that jihadists in Syria are taking extra security precautions after becoming convinced of the likelihood of military strikes (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], September 8).

Uncertainty over a military action against the Syrian regime has increased since the end of August when the British House of Commons rejected any British involvement in such an action (BBC, August 30). U.S. President Barak Obama, who seemed to be embarrassed for not acting earlier after describing the use of chemical weapons as a "red line" that would not be tolerated if crossed, eventually placed the possibility of military action against al-Assad in the hands of Congress. Furthermore, the top backer of the Assad regime, Russia, is expected to join China in vetoing any UN Security Council resolution approving an intervention.

Two main factors have played a major role in strengthening the presence of jihadists in Syria, in addition to the primary factor of course, which is the nature of the brutal campaign of the Syrian regime against civilians since September 2011. The first factor is the state of frustration among Syrians resulting from what they describe as the absence of international support for them despite a number of massacres committed against them. The second factor is the strength of jihadist narratives that exploit this frustration to recruit more local and foreign jihadists.

Only three days after the news circulated about the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against civilians in

the eastern Ghutah area on the outskirts of Damascus, the influential jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra posted an audio message by the group's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Golani. Entitled "An Eye for an Eye," al-Golani's used his message to vow to take revenge for the Syrians killed in that attack:

We say to the bereaved mothers and our people in al-Ghutah al-Sharqiyah that avenging the blood of your children is our responsibility and the responsibility of each mujahid until we make them [Syrian regime] experience the same suffering... Hence, we announce a series of raids, entitled 'An eye for an eye.' These raids are to target Nusayri [i.e. Alawite] villages. God willing, each of the Nusayri villages will pay for a rocket that bombarded our people in the Levant. Moreover, we allocate 1,000 rockets to attack Nusayri villages in retaliation for the Ghutah massacre. The blood of the Sunnis is not as cheap as these fools think. [4]

Since al-Golani's audio message, attacks on Alawite-dominated areas have increased, including a number of massacres reported by pro-regime sources. [5] Due to the complexity of the Syrian crisis where sectarian factors interact with both international and regional factors, Syria's jihadists have succeeded in presenting simple answers to this complexity.

The narratives used by jihadists which center on "the West plotting against Muslims" or the sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria offer easy explanations that appeal to frustrated Syrians. The jihadist discourse is therefore prevailing in some areas in Syria as it provides an alternative to the confusion of a multi-factional civil war.

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Notes

1. "Proposed Authorization to Use Military Force in Syria," Testimony, John Kerry, Secretary of State: Opening Remarks before the House Armed Services Committee, Washington D.C., September 10, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214028.htm>.
2. Al-'A'mili's Tweets were collected on this Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=213206022175480&l=218a6625d7>.
3. The full text of the August 24, 2013 interview can be found here: <https://app.box.com/s/4u239o63cexcwfyfes01>.
4. Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Golani "An Eye for an Eye," al-Manara al-Bayda Media, August 24, 2013, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46827>.
5. See for example, al-Hadath News, September 11, 2013, <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/99639>.

Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya: A Key Armed Opposition Group in the Battle to Cut Assad Off from Damascus

Nicholas A. Heras

Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya (KFI - Islamic al-Farouq Brigades) is a newly formed Syrian Islamist armed opposition group that constitutes an important faction within the powerful umbrella rebel organization Jabhat Tahrir Suria al-Islamiya (SILF-Syrian Islamic Liberation Front). This fighting group is currently growing in public visibility as part of an important armed opposition campaign in the strategic central-western Syrian governorates of Homs and Hama. As part of the SILF, the KFI is nominally seeking to defeat the al-Assad government, secure the unity and independence of Syria as a distinct entity and to utilize Islamic law as a reference point for governance. [1]

The group was started by fighters who once belonged to the national umbrella armed opposition organization Kata'ib al-Farouq. Osama Juneidi, the commander of Kata'ib al-Farouq, stated that the KFI split from its parent organization under the leadership of local religious figure Shaykh Amjad al-Bitar, who had joined Kata'ib al-Farouq through the support of some expatriate and clerical supporters of the movement. Shaykh al-Bitar, who according to Juneidi was not a senior commander in Kata'ib al-Farouq, had disagreements with the leadership of the organization and decided to voluntarily leave Kata'ib al-Farouq and form the KFI with members of Kata'ib al-Farouq that supported him, including some brigades of local Sunni Arab tribesmen (for more information on Osama Juneidi see Militant Leadership Monitor, August 2013). [2]

In spite of this separation, the KFI remains an ally of Kata'ib al-Farouq in the SILF. [3] The association of the group with the SILF is an integral part of its identity formation and its logo is the same green spiked-shield of the SILF, with the name "Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya" written upon it. Through its official media content, the movement positions itself as a pious Islamist fighting organization waging jihad against the Assad government. Kata'ib al-Farouq fighters are referred to as mujahideen (those waging jihad) and are shown in prayer before battle. In some of its media content, KFI fighters wave the black flag of jihad, and display the jihadist flag popularized by the Islamic State of Iraq. [4] The group also depicts itself as a professionally-organized military force with a strong *esprit de corps* grounded in

Islamic piety. The group's media shows its fighters in control of substantial military hardware, including tanks and rockets mounted in pick-up trucks. [5]

Beyond the spiritual guidance of Shaykh Amjad al-Bitar, the group appears to have several military leaders. At the present time, there is no known or cited estimate for the number of fighters that belong to KFI. A review of the social media content produced by the organization indicates that it might have a fighting force of hundreds of fighters, a number of whom appear to be defected Syrian soldiers.

The KFI officially released its first video in late March and purports to depict its fighters at an undisclosed location firing upon a Syrian military aircraft from the back of a pick-up truck. [6] The KFI has steadily increased the frequency of its participation in attacks against the Syrian military and its armed auxiliaries in the areas east of the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama. The KFI first gained notoriety in the Arabic language press for its role in freeing four foreign nationals (Ukrainian, Moldovan and Dominican) from an alleged opposition paramilitary operating in eastern Hama governorate. The KFI alleged that the kidnappers were actually agents of the Assad regime from Lebanon who intended to execute their prisoners in order to frame the armed opposition for their deaths (al-Jazeera [Doha], June 17).

Currently, the KFI portrays itself as one of the most active opposition organizations in two multi-faction rebel campaigns in western Syria:

- The recent Ma'arakat al-Jasad al-Wahad (One Body Battle), which was launched at the end of April in the fertile al-Ghab plain region of western Syria that includes southwestern Idlib, northern Hama and southwestern Latakia governorates.
- Inspired by the Ma'arakat al-Jasad al-Wahad is the ongoing Ma'arakat Qadimun (Coming Battle) which is developing in the semi-arid steppe-land district of Salamiyya in eastern Hama governorate and the desert districts of al-Mukharram and Tidmur northeast of the city of Homs in eastern Homs governorate. The Ma'arakat al-Jasad al-Wahad was proclaimed by several armed opposition factions, including constituent brigades of the national umbrella organizations Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (Movement of the Freeman of the Levant) and Alwiyya Ahfaad al-Rasul (Descendants of the Prophet), Liwa al-Haqq (Divine Truth Brigade), and member groups of the SILF including Suqur al-Sham (Falcons of the Levant), Liwa al-Tawhid (Holy Unity Brigade) and the KFI. The campaign is intended as a means of coordinating a rebel-

led retaliation against the government of Bashar al-Assad in response to the massacres of 248 Sunni Muslim civilians in the western coastal city of Banias and its suburb of al-Bayda in April. [7]

Rebel fighters participating in Ma'arakat Qadimun have stated that they are seeking to prevent the formation of a *dawlat nusayriya* (Alawite State) and are attempting to cut off the Syrian military in Homs and Hama from Damascus by seizing parts of the inter-governorate M5 Highway that links the capital to pro-government regions of coastal western Syria and the M3 Highway that links the Syrian military-controlled outpost in the central desert city of Palmyra to Homs. The rebels are also seeking to liberate the cities of Homs and Hama and their hinterlands from the control of government forces. [8] The KFI has received increased attention as a result of its active participation in the Ma'arakat Qadimun and its recent success in seizing territory from the Syrian military in eastern Hama governorate.

These multi-factional battlefronts are intended to apply pressure to the core, western governorates where the Assad government might form an Alawite-led statelet in the event that it loses control over Damascus and is forced to contract its rule. Although a relatively new armed opposition group, the KFI has firmly placed itself into the order of battle of the SILF. A great test of the offensive capabilities and the *asabiya* (social solidarity) of the constituent organizations participating in the Ma'arakat Qadimun, including the KFI, has yet to come as this campaign has not yet mounted a significant challenge to the Assad regime's control of the strategic Damascus-Homs corridor and its environs.

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Notes

1. Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, "Who are we?" <http://syrialiberationfront.net/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%86-%D8%9F-2/>.
2. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJIda5B1QHU>.
3. Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, "Components of the Front," <http://syrialiberationfront.net/%D9%85%D9%83%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9/>.
4. Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya YouTube Page, "The Prayer Before Going Out for the Battle," May 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdCCEZnwqvk>; Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya YouTube Page, "Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya Mujahideen," April 26, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmvYHBcGvgv&desktop_uri=%252Fwat

ch%253Fv%253DwmvYHbcGvgv&app=desktop; Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya YouTube Page, "Friday Sermon to the Mujahideen of Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya in an Underground Trench," June 8, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhjcviNo5uA>.

5. Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya YouTube Page, "Rejoicing Mujahideen Heroes on Tanks Looted from the Village Salba," June 4, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FTn_1hV3e0; Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya YouTube Page "Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya and Kata'ib al-Islam Repel a Night Convoy in Hama Countryside," May 16, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cdpk--LPTA>.

6. Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya YouTube Page, "Kata'ib al-Farouq al-Islamiya Addressing the Surveillance Aircraft," March 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiOEzL18r8>.

7. For the Baniyas and al-Bayda massacres see "No One's Left: Summary Executions by Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas," Human Rights Watch, September 13, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/09/13/no-one-s-left-0>; For the motivation behind the launching of the Ma'arakat al-Jasad al-Wahad see "Statement of the Beginning of the First Stage of the One Body Battle," Ma'arakat al-Jasad al-Wahad YouTube page, April 23, 2013, Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=srdCUTHjrvY; For updates on the ongoing Ma'arakat Qadmun, refer to the "Ma'arakat Qadmoon" Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/Alqadmoon.Combat>.

8. Syrian opposition media sources have been covering the developing Ma'arakat Qadimun campaign in some depth. See: Coordinating the Eastern Hama Countryside YouTube page, "Ali Muhammad: Report on the Town of 'Aqreebat, Liberated in the 'Coming Battle' and the Humanitarian Situation Resulting from the Bombing," September 11, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qHTb20U3DU&desktop_uri=%252Fwatch%253Fv%253D1qHTb20U3DU&app=desktop; Farouq Syria YouTube page, "Orient News-'Coming Battle'-Eastern Hama Countryside-Kata'ib al-Farouq in Syria," August 28, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_t2ro_TNGs&desktop_uri=%252Fwatch%253Fv%253Dh_t2ro_TNGs&app=desktop; Orient News YouTube page, "Orient News: Progress of the Revolutionaries in the 'Coming Battle' to Lift the Siege of Homs," August 25, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9kLUT4LDy8&desktop_uri=%252Fwatch%253Fv%253DN9kLUT4LDy8&app=desktop.

Security Forces Sidelined as Salafists Battle Houthi Shiites in Yemen

Andrew McGregor

With Yemen in the midst of a political reconstruction, there are signs that the Zaidi Shiite insurgent group known as the Houthis is taking advantage of the ongoing turmoil to consolidate their *de facto* rule of the northern province of Sa'ada while making inroads in other parts of the country. Yemen's military is largely preoccupied with its struggle against al-Qaeda and its allies in southern Yemen, but the Houthist expansion has not gone unopposed, with Salafist tribesmen tied to the Islamist Islah Party resisting all attempts by the Houthis to spread the areas under their control. Yemen's security forces have little influence in the northern regions and at times have even been outgunned by both factions in the conflict. With little political will in the National Reconciliation Government for yet another war against the Houthis (there have been six since 2004), the security forces have been largely relegated to the sidelines in the ongoing Houthi-Salafist conflict. Security officials suggest at least 60 people have been killed in several weeks of tribal clashes that began with a land dispute but intensified when the Houthist and Islah movements became involved to support opposing sides in the quarrel (*Daily Star* [Beirut], September 13).

Amran Governorate and the Route to Sana'a

From their stronghold in the mountains of Sa'ada Governorate, the Houthis have expanded their area of influence to large parts of the neighboring governorates of Amran, al-Jawf, Hajjah and al-Mahwit as well as establishing a strong presence in the Ibb Governorate (particularly the Radhma region), in the capital, Sana'a, and in the surrounding Sana'a Governorate.

The worst clashes have occurred in the Amran governorate of Yemen, lying just north of Sana'a. Houthist forces have established positions in the mountains in regions that are also claimed by tribesmen loyal to the Salafist Islah Party who accuse the Houthis of trying to seize land in the area. Security forces failed in an attempt to intervene between the two heavily-armed factions in Amran (Yemen Times, August 22; September 10). Control of Amran would give the Houthis enormous leverage in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, which would be exposed to rapid infiltration or invasion by Houthist forces based just north of the capital in Amran.

Non-Shiites living in Amran also complain that Houthist militias have tried to take control of *zakat* donations, alms payments that form one of the five pillars of Islam. Attempts to commandeer *zakat* funds earmarked for building a school led to violent clashes in the Harf Sifyan area of Amran governorate that left eight people dead (Yemen Times, August 25). According to al-Asha district security manager Muhammad al-Raei, local security forces have not intervened in the conflict because both sides possess heavier weapons than the security forces (Yemen Times, September 10). Yemeni President Abdu Rabu Mansur Hadi formed a mediation committee in mid-August, but the new body has been able to accomplish little short of organizing ceasefires to allow both sides to recover their dead and wounded (Yemen Times, August 27).

The Situation in Sa'ada and Ibb

In the city of Sa'ada, capital of the Houthi stronghold of Sa'ada Governorate, it is reported that all real authority is now in the hands of the Houthist movement alone. According to the military commander in Sa'ada, Brigadier General Hassan Libuza, security duties are now divided between the army and the Houthis, with the latter providing security for Houthi events and the army providing security for government events, which are increasingly meaningless as the Houthis continue to consolidate their control. General Libuza maintains the army is "trying to coexist with the status quo in Sa'ada governorate" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 9).

The Houthis have complained that international jihadis are pouring into the town of Damaj (Sada'a Governorate), where they are alleged to be building fortifications (Press TV [Tehran], July 16). Damaj was the scene of a violent six-week siege by Houthis in 2011 who had failed to disarm the town's substantial Salafist population. Though it was long known as a center for the study of moderate Islam, Damaj is now the site of bitter sectarian fighting as the Houthis attempt to establish control over the Salafist-dominated town. By late August, President Hadi had established a special commission designed to promote a ceasefire and reconciliation in Damaj, though the new body has had little influence so far (SABA [Sana'a], August 21; Yemen Times, August 22).

Security officials in the al-Asha district of Amran governorate accuse the Houthis of planting landmines in mountainous areas under their control to prevent other groups from seizing them, though one mine detonated accidentally left ten Houthis dead. This new proliferation of landmines comes just as Yemen was making progress in their eradication (Yemen Times, September 5).

Both sides in the scattered conflict accuse the other of bringing in non-resident fighters to tip the scales in Amran and Ibb governorates (Arab News, September 9). In Ibb Governorate, there are continuing clashes between the pro-Houthist al-Siraj tribe and the Salafist al-Da'an tribe that began in July when the Sirajis began to set up roadblocks controlling access to al-Radhma district. Added to the violent clashes in the region is a wave of kidnappings carried out by both factions. A government-sponsored attempt to reach a ceasefire by promising 20 rifles to the side that had suffered the most casualties collapsed when the Da'an tribe backed out after learning the rifles would go to al-Siraj, fearing the weapons would be turned on them after delivery (Yemen Times, September 5; September 10).

The National Dialogue Conference

Yemen's coalition government issued a public apology on behalf of the former regime to all residents of Sada'a for the series of military campaigns conducted against Houthist followers in that governorate (Yemen Post, August 22). A Houthi representative at the National Dialogue Conference (a government-sponsored national reconciliation effort), Amal al-Maliki, said the apology was accepted (unlike a similar apology proffered to the separatist Southern Movement) "to enable the government to implement more steps such as compensation and national reconciliation... [However], everything is still ink on paper and nothing tangible has been achieved so far. Reconstruction hasn't started and those affected haven't received any compensation so far" (Yemen Times, September 3; Yemen Post, August 24). Among the NDC initiatives approved by Yemen's cabinet are recommendations for the creation of a fund to compensate victims of the internal conflicts in Yemen's northern and southern regions and the release of all separatists and Houthi rebels arrested after the 2011 anti-regime demonstrations (Gulf News, August 29). Non-Houthis delegates to the NDC have complained of "crimes" committed by the movement against other residents of Sa'ada, including murder, torture, illegal arrests and the displacement of over 130,000 people (al-Sahwah.net, July 11).

The most prominent Houthist delegate to the NDC is Yahya Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the brother of movement leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi. Yahya was the target of unidentified gunmen in Sana'a in late July but survived the attempt on his life. The movement released a statement describing the failed assassination as part of an American/Israeli plot to damage the NDC and drive the country into a civil war (Press TV [Tehran], July 27). There are, however, other suspicions that the attack was the work of Yemen's national security service,

whose dissolution the Houthis have sought since 13 Zaydi Shiites were killed and over 100 wounded in a July 10 attempt to storm the local security headquarters to free a number of Shiite dissidents (AFP, July 14).

Salafist Resistance

Islah Party leader Hamid al-Ahmar has denied the allegation that attacks on Houthis by his followers were retribution for the looting and destruction of Sabafon offices by Houthis in Amran and Sa'ada. [1] Sabafon, Yemen's leading mobile phone network provider, counts amongst its major shareholders the Ahmar Group, a major holding entity chaired by Hamid al-Ahmar. Hamid did, however, say that he had sought the help of Hassan Zaid, the leader of Yemen's al-Haq Party, in mediating between Islah loyalists and Houthis in order to end a campaign of "slander" against him and end attacks against his business interests in northern Yemen (Yemen Post, September 8). Al-Ahmar, one of the most powerful men in Yemen, is believed to have grown close to authorities in Qatar in recent years as the Emirate seeks to expand its influence in Yemen (al-Monitor, August 20, 2013).

Muhammad Musa al-Ameri, the leader of the Rashad Union Party, Yemen's first Salafist political party, has denounced the Houthis' establishment of a *de facto* state within a state in parts of Yemen:

All of the power is in their hands, from the local authorities, the banks and district attorneys to the management of prisons, religious sites and school curricula... The people of Yemen find this unacceptable, insofar as it cleaves off a section of the Republic of Yemen in a manner that is incompatible with the peaceful political process. It is unacceptable that a person can simultaneously take part in the peaceful political process and maintain illegal armed groups... Sa'ada province has been hijacked and now exists outside the framework of the Republic of Yemen; the state's presence there is only a formality. The strange thing is that the central government in Sana'a finances the activities of the local authority in Sa'ada despite the fact that it has no influence there. This is cause for wonder. It could possibly be the only place the world where a state allocates funds to an area over which it has no influence (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 9).

The International Dimension

As the threat of U.S. military intervention in Syria grew in early September, the Houthis organized demonstrations in the capital, Sana'a and in numerous places in Sa'ada Governorate.

The Houthis maintained their traditional anti-American stance and condemned any possible military intervention, saying it would only lead to further radicalization in the region (Yemen Post, September 6). These demonstrations came soon after similar protests in mid-August denouncing the deployment of American drones in Yemen to assassinate various militant leaders and their associates.

Yemeni officials say that hundreds of Houthi fighters have left for Syria to defend the Assad regime, regarding the fighting there as "a holy jihad." The officials maintain that Iran has provided financial encouragement for the fighters, who enter Syria via Hezbollah camps in Lebanon (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 30). A Saudi source reported a Free Syrian Army ambush of Yemeni volunteers in the Dara'a district of Syria in June that allegedly killed over 60 Houthist fighters (*Okaz* [Jeddah], June 22).

The true extent of Iranian influence on the Houthist movement has never been satisfactorily demonstrated, but recent reports of Houthist fighters in Sa'adah wearing uniforms similar to those of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps suggest that some degree of supply or financing may exist (National Yemen, September 14). A ship intercepted by the Yemeni Coast Guard with U.S. naval assistance last January was reported to have been carrying a load of Iranian arms destined for the Houthist movement. The cargo was said to have included SAM-2 and SAM-3 surface-to-air missiles (SABA [Sana'a], February 3; Reuters, February 3).

Conclusion

Ali al-Emad, a Houthi representative at the NDC, has suggested that the failure of security forces to intervene in the Houthi-Salafist conflict was deliberate: "Security officials are failing to uphold their responsibilities. There are political powers out there that are trying to exhaust the Houthis by encouraging numerous conflicts so that the group has to fight on numerous fronts in various governorates" (Yemen Times, September 14). The inability of the security forces in Amran to impose security on the region is reflected in many other locations in Yemen, leading to demands from prominent businessmen that they be allowed to form their own private militias to protect themselves from abduction or assassination if the government is not able to quickly reverse the deteriorating security situation (Yemen Observer, September 5).

Ongoing clashes between the Sunni Salafists and the Zaidi Shiites have so far been as much about land as religion, but there is a risk that Yemen's tribal combat may be absorbed into a larger sectarian conflict pitting the Shiite/Alawite axis

of Iran, Syria and Lebanon's Hezbollah movement against the Sunni/Salafist Gulf states. Saudi Arabia is alarmed by the nascent Shiite state on its southern border but efforts to demonstrate its displeasure to Sana'a have resulted only in new openings for the Kingdom's regional rival, Qatar. Unable to project force in the north, Yemen's central government risks irrelevancy at a time when it is most needed to coordinate national unity efforts.

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Note

1. The full name of the Islah Party is al-Tajammu al-Yamani li'l-Islah (Yemeni Congregation for Reform). The political wing of the Houthist movement, Ansar Allah, was formed in 2012.