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Lebanese army was deployed Monday after a week of battles in which 17 people were killed (Source Reuters)

MERGER OF NORTHERN MALI REBEL MOVEMENTS CREATES POLITICAL DISTANCE FROM ISLAMIST MILITANTS

Andrew McGregor

Proclaiming that the move was the only means of securing peace in northern Mali, the three largest rebel movements in the region announced their merger on November 4. The merger brings together the normally hostile members of one Arab militia, the Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad (MAA), and two Tuareg groups, the secular Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) and the Haut Conseil pour l’Unité de l’Azawad (HCUA), which contains many former members of the al-Qaeda-allied Islamist Ansar al-Din movement. No name has been chosen for the new movement, which will be effective “within 45 days” after approval had been given by the membership of each group (*Soir de Bamako*, November 4; al-Jazeera, November 5; AFP, November 5). The rebel movements are looking to present a united front after withdrawing from peace talks with the central government on September 26. Reports of a forthcoming decision to merge, undertaken by delegations of the three groups based at the now-suspended peace talks in the Burkina Faso capital of Ouagadougou, were given a hostile reception by groups of youths in Kidal (Maliactu.net, November 1).

In Bamako, there are fears that jihadists are re-infiltrating the north to recover weapons caches buried beneath the sand, as well as concerns about what much of the Malian press regards as duplicity from Paris in dealing with the north – the locally so-called “Dutch policy” (in reference to French president François Hollande), under which Paris is accused of arranging a separate deal with the MNLA with only a symbolic presence in Kidal from the Malian national government (*L’Annonneur* [Bamako], November 7; Maliactu.net, October 30; *Les Échos* [Bamako], November 6). During a recent visit to Mali, French Armed Forces chief-of-staff Admiral Edouard Guillaud expressed the ambivalence in France’s relationship with the MNLA rebels by saying that “France is neither pro, nor anti-MNLA.” Admiral Guillaud was reported to have discussed a defense

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agreement between the French and Malian militaries of a type unique to the former French colonies in Africa. Guillaud also promised to maintain French air support, Special Forces units in northern Mali and an operational headquarters at the Bamako-Senou International Airport (Maliactu.net, October 17; *L'Essor* [Bamako], October 10).

The Arab MAA was formed in February, 2012 (initially under the name Front de Libération Nationale de l'Azawad – FLNA) as a self-defense militia incorporating members of earlier Arab militias and Arab soldiers of the Malian Army who deserted after the fall of Timbuktu to Islamist groups last year (for clashes between the MNLA and MAA, see Terrorism Monitor Brief, June 3).

Despite the merger, the MNLA was accused of mounting a November 8 attack on a Malian military patrol in Egazargane, roughly 86 miles from the town of Menaka, though it is possible the clash was the result of a disagreement that followed a small collision between vehicles belonging to the army and the MNLA, respectively (Maliactu.net, November 8; AFP, November 10).

Efforts to arrive at a settlement in northern Mali have been further complicated by the abduction and murder on November 2 of two French nationals working for Radio France Internationale, Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon. Malian intelligence sources have said the kidnapping was the work of Baye ag Bakabo, an ethnic Tuareg who was a low-level member of Abd al-Karim al-Targui's unit of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) before he was expelled on suspicion of stealing money. In this regard, the kidnappings may have been a failed attempt to compensate al-Targui through significant ransoms for the two journalists and work his way back into the group, a scenario suggested by Bakabo's relations in Kidal (Journal du Mali, November 9; AP, November 6). Al-Targui is a prime suspect in a number of high-profile abductions carried out in recent years in northern Mali. A statement issued by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb claimed responsibility for the abductions and murders as "a response to crimes committed by France against Malians and the work of African and international forces against the Muslims of Azawad" (Sahara Media [Nouakchott], November 6). There was speculation from military sources that Baye ag Bakabo had joined the MNLA in the interests of obscuring his past engagement with AQIM (Maliactu.net, November 8). Many Tuareg have displayed a notable fluidity in their organizational allegiance.

The two French nationals were seized outside the home of an MNLA official in Kidal that they had planned to interview. The pursuit of the kidnappers started quickly and in force,

with ground troops on the trail being assisted by two Rafale fighter-jets diverted from another operation in northern Mali and a pair of helicopters dispatched from the air-strip at Tessalit (*Le Monde*, November 8). Although the kidnappers escaped, the bodies of the two journalists were discovered, killed either through panic on the part of their abductors or on the orders of al-Targui as pursuers closed in. Nine militants were reported to have been arrested in connection with the case on November 8 (Reuters, November 8).

MNLA vice-president Mahamadou Djeri Maiga said the movement had been "humiliated" by the abductions and were further concerned by the attitude of security authorities, who have declined offers of assistance from the MNLA in finding the perpetrators, though the movement is making its own enquiries: "We will share our results with those responsible for the case. We cannot sit idly by and do nothing" (AFP, November 4). The deaths of the journalists have been used in some quarters in Bamako to argue that the Tuareg movements are incapable of administering Kidal or Azawad as autonomous regions (*Le Pays* [Ouagadougou], November 6). A French government spokesman said on November 4 that France would "probably" increase its military presence in Mali in response to the slayings (Maliactu.net, November 4).

Bamako has backed off from its prior insistence that all arrest warrants issued for leading Tuareg rebels be carried out prior to arriving at a settlement for the north. On October 29, the central government announced it was lifting arrest warrants issued for Ibrahim ag Muhammad Assaleh of the MNLA, Ahmada ag Bibi and brothers Muhammad and Alghabass ag Intallah of the HCUA, the latter pair being the sons of the powerful leader of the Ifoghas Tuareg of Kidal, Intallah ag Attaher (for Alghabass ag Intallah, see Militant Leadership Monitor, January 2013). The reason given was the measure was needed to "facilitate the pursuit of the process of national reconciliation" (AFP, October 29). Ag Bibi and the Intallah brothers are all candidates in the November 24 parliamentary elections.

A number of Malian and African human rights organizations have opposed lifting the arrest warrants, claiming they would promote a climate of impunity for individuals accused of serious crimes, such as war crimes, murder, rebellion and terrorism. According to the leader of the Malian Association of Human Rights, a political solution to the Mali crisis "cannot be at the expense of the victims of the crisis or the independence of the judiciary" (*L'Essor* [Bamako], October 24).

Further talks with the rebel movements are scheduled to take

place this month, but Bamako's position has been consistent - it will not consider autonomy for the north under any circumstances.

BERBERS SEIZE LIBYAN OIL TERMINAL TO PRESS DEMAND FOR RECOGNITION

Andrew McGregor

The ongoing and economically crippling occupation of Libya's Mellitah gas and oil terminal (63 miles west of Tripoli) by armed Berber protesters actually became worse on November 12, when workers at the terminal launched a 72-hour strike to protest the occupation, leaving open the possibility of major power cuts to Libyan coastal and mountain communities (Libya Herald, November 12).

The Mellitah oil terminal, which has a capacity of handling 160,000 barrels per day (bpd), is one of several major terminals in Libya suffering blockades by armed gunmen; others include the 340,000 bpd al-Sidr and the 220,000 bpd Ras Lanuf terminals (for the broader implications of the various blockades, see *Terrorism Monitor*, October 31). The Berber protests at the terminal began on October 26, when armed men gave the ruling General National Congress (GNC) energy committee a one-week ultimatum regarding language rights and increased representation on Libya's constitutional committee before they would shut the terminal down.

Libya's constitutional committee has allotted six seats of 60 to Libya's minorities; two for the Berbers (the self-called Imazighen), two for the Tuareg and two for the Tubu of southern Libya. The method of assembling the committee has been a source of intense disagreement over whether members should be selected or elected directly, with the latter choice eventually prevailing, even though it has meant further delays in beginning the committee's work. In the meantime, much of the country is at a standstill until the new Libyan state is defined and organized. Berber representatives to the GNC resigned in July after failing to persuade the Congress to make Amazigh, the language of the Berbers, an official language of Libya.

Berber anger at the constitutional process has been building for several months. In mid-August, Berber protesters demanding recognition of minority rights forced their way into the Libyan parliament in Tripoli, smashing furniture and breaking windows (Reuters, August 14). In late September, Berber youth from the western Jabal Nafusa region cut off a gas pipeline to protest the absence of the Amazigh language

from the proposed constitution (Middle East Online, September 30; AFP, October 1).

Prime Minister Ali Zeidan has warned of serious consequences if the oil blockades are not removed soon, including impediments to Libya's ability to cover its budget expenditures, beginning in December. The GNC's inability to pay nearly \$100 million owed for earlier imports of wheat now threatens the ability of Libyan wheat importers to make further purchases for the heavily subsidized bread industry (Reuters, November 6). Zeidan specifically mentioned the blockage of the Mellitah terminal as having the potential of forcing Italy to seek its oil and gas elsewhere (Reuters, November 10). The Mellitah terminal is owned jointly by Italy's Eni Petroleum and the Libyan state-owned National Oil Corporation (NOC). According to Eni CEO Paolo Scaroni, the Berber occupiers are pressuring the company to cut gas supplies to Italy (Reuters, November 6). Eni is the largest foreign oil company operating in Libya and was responsible for producing some 270,000 bpd before the fall of Qaddafi.

The Berber gunmen are led by Adel al-Falu, a former Libyan army officer once tasked with protecting the Mellitah terminal. With oil exports from the terminal halted, al-Falu is now seeking to halt gas exports through trans-Mediterranean pipelines to Italy, with the objective of pressuring Italy and the European Union to force Libya's GNC to recognize the Amazigh language (Reuters, November 8). Most of the 50 to 75 gunmen occupying Mellitah arrived from the nearby town of Zuwara in coast-guard boats the Berbers seized during the 2011 revolution. Many of the occupiers are veterans of the revolution. Zuwara has been in the midst of a revival of Berber culture and language since the launch of the revolution (Agence de Presse Kabyle, September 19, 2011). The Amazigh name for Zuwara incorporates the name of the Berber group that lives in the area, Tamurt n Wat Willul (Town of the Ait Willul) (for Berber communities in Libya, see *Terrorism Monitor Brief*, Pt. 1, May 5 2011; Pt. 2, May 12, 2011). Zuwara is the hometown of Nuri Abu Sahmain, the chairman of Libya's ruling body, the Tripoli-based GNC. The largest concentration of Libya's approximate 600,000 Berbers (roughly 10 percent of the population) reside around the western town of Jadu in the Jabal Nafusa region, the home of a Berber militia that played a vital role in the overthrow of the late Mu'ammarr Qaddafi.

The Libyan protests are part of a larger movement to revive the Berber language and its dialects in North Africa after centuries of official and unofficial repression designed to replace Amazigh with Arabic. The problem now, however, is finding qualified instructors of Amazigh. Few such qualified

instructors exist in Libya, meaning that only one school in southern Libya will begin teaching Amazigh next year (*The National* [Abu Dhabi], November 5). In Zuwara, some primary schools have succeeded in hiring Amazigh language teachers from Algeria and Morocco (Reuters, November 8).

There is little consensus on the exact extent of the blockade at the Mellitah terminal, in terms of both oil and gas exports. Even as the Prime Minister warns of the long-term impact of the blockade, NOC spokesmen have maintained that the occupiers are limited to a small part of the terminal and that “the complex is working as normal,” with ships loading oil and gas continuing to flow through the Greenstream pipeline to Sicily. On the same day, however, Eni CEO Paolo Scaroni said the Mellitah terminal was “under attack” (Libya Herald, November 6). The Mellitah occupation does not appear to have affected gas flows to Italy through the Greenstream pipeline from the offshore al-Bouri field. The Berber occupiers announced on November 6 that they would cut off the Greenstream gas pipeline (AFP, November 6). On November 8, however, the militants said they would restore gas flows on November 10 as a “good-will gesture,” but with the warning that the pipeline would be cut if the number of seats allotted to the Berber community on the constitutional committee was not increased (Libya Herald, November 8).

Unable to enforce the writ of the central government anywhere in Libya without the cooperation of local armed militias, the Libyan Prime Minister has also warned recently of the possibility of foreign military intervention unless the nation rallies to eliminate the armed groups: “The international community cannot tolerate a state in the middle of the Mediterranean that is a source of violence, terrorism and murder” (al-Jazeera, November 10).

Militancy in the Niger Delta Becoming Increasingly Political – A Worry for 2015

Mark McNamee

As oil bunkering, piracy, and kidnapping in the Niger Delta has continued or worsened over the course of the year, the general instability has increasingly politicized militants in the region, exacerbating a growing problem for the central government. The more political mindset of the militants has entailed an intensification of the rhetoric emanating from the Delta, marking an evolution in the aims of the

militant networks in the region. The more political – and religious – justifications cited in their threats indicate that the militants are pursuing loftier goals in recent times than the mere pragmatic economic benefits derived via oil theft, which since the 2009 amnesty has been the prime driver of local criminal behavior. In such an environment, 2015 looms large, not only because of the contentious presidential elections that year, but also because the stipend payments and training protocols of the 2009 amnesty officially expire in 2015.

To be sure, instability and criminal activity has not stopped and several significant incidents have occurred in recent months. On September 6, unknown gunmen kidnapped the nation’s second-most senior Anglican archbishop, Ignatius Kattey, and his wife near their residence in Port Harcourt. Similarly, on September 11, a traditional ruler in southeastern Edo state was kidnapped from his palace. Shell has likewise experienced significant disruptions in output due to criminal activity over the past several months. In mid-October, the firm decried the level of oil theft and claimed it had been forced to defer some 300,000 barrels of oil per day. A total of 189 crude theft points were repaired on the Trans-Niger Pipeline (TNP) and the Nembe Creek Trunk Line (NCTL) between January and September of this year, and the TNP line has been closed down at least five times since early July due to leaks from crude oil thefts. An official for the Nigerian branch of Shell called for a more concerted effort to protect the lines and lamented what was “turning out to be a dangerous development in the Niger Delta” (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], October 15). Criminal activity offshore has also reached dangerous levels. A report from early October noted that the amount of money stolen via piracy had reached \$100 million since 2010 as the militants have streamlined their operations and tactics, leading to a highly successful attempt rate and many significant heists. [1] A recent report noted further that piracy attacks off Nigeria’s coast had increased by a third year-on-year. [2] MEND-affiliated criminals also claimed the high-profile kidnapping of two U.S. sailors off Nigeria’s coast in late October (Bloomberg, October 25).

Perhaps of greater importance is the transformation of the underlying motivation for these incidents. Prior to the amnesty, while profit was undeniably an aim, MEND-affiliated militants were primarily politically motivated. As a result, many of the attacks did not involve monetary gain and were direct assaults on personnel and energy installations with the goal of destroying output and forcing the government to address the needs of the local population. For the past several years, brazen theft has by-and-large supplanted the former political ideology of the pre-amnesty militants and the bunkering and distribution of oil became deeply engrained as a strategy for economic livelihood within the delta.

Currently, MEND and similarly motivated groups appear to be assuming an increasingly political stance in their activity.

Always an attractive means of earning income, opportunistic criminal activity in the Delta (kidnapping, oil bunkering and piracy) may become a form of political protest once again. A few recent incidents demonstrate this trend:

- The kidnapper of Archbishop Kattay claimed that the kidnappings in the Delta and elsewhere were intended “to draw the attention of the Federal Government to the sufferings of the people of Kokori and Urhobo at large” and cited the “continuous cheating of our people by the Federal Government,” noting that “for over 50 years now, they have been drilling oil from our community... yet we have nothing to show for it.” He went on to threaten to shut down all well heads in the area if his demands for development were not met (*The Guardian*, September 19).
- MEND’s ultimately unfulfilled threat against Chevron’s Escravos plant on October 1, part of the militants’ so-called Hurricane Exodus operation, was a clear act of political protest, with no discernible monetary objective (see *Terrorism Monitor*, September 20).
- In early September, MEND offered to cease its campaign (launched in April) against the government and oil industry if the government addressed its political demands, i.e. development of the region and more influence in the oil sector (Platts.com, September 9).
- Purportedly part of Operations Hurricane Exodus, MEND spokesman Jomo Gbomo claimed responsibility for an explosion and fire at a refinery in Warri on October 22, saying the attack was retaliation for the “unsustainable and fraudulent Niger Delta amnesty program” (*This Day* [Lagos], October 23). There were conflicting reports regarding casualties and the nature of the incident. Some sources claimed at least ten were killed; the firm claimed an investigation was ongoing but claimed there were no casualties, indicated that the explosion was caused by a gas leak rather than an attack. (*Nigerian Tribune* [Ibadan], October 23; *SpyGhana* [Accra], October 22).

Some MEND statements indicate a more religious bent, a novel and potentially destabilizing development. Reportedly to “save Christianity in Nigeria from annihilation”, MEND threatened in April to launch attacks against mosques, *hajj* camps, Islamic institutions, gatherings of Muslims, and Islamic clerics in a campaign codenamed “Operation Barbarossa” (*Leadership* [Abuja], April 13). While this was not the first time MEND-related militants made threats in reaction to Boko Haram activity, their statements included more direct threats against Muslims and Islamic institutions than their previous rhetoric (see *Terrorism Monitor*, February 23, 2012). Although it was later rescinded, Operation Barbarossa raised concerns about the expansion of MEND interests to the activity of Boko Haram, the nation’s most pressing political and security problem. Though it is difficult to gauge the seriousness of these threats, MEND spokesman Jomo Gbomo said the movement’s decision to rescind

the threats was due to “the intervention of well-meaning Nigerians, religious bodies and the Nigerian government’s recent show of sincerity with the order to release from detention women, children, relatives and suspected Boko Haram members, giving room for genuine dialogue (*This Day* [Lagos], May 23). In short, MEND was rewarding the government for making steps towards peaceful conflict resolution while showing genuine concern for innocent Nigerians – an approach MEND would similarly like to see directed towards the Delta.

Timing is compounding matters. The controversy surrounding President Jonathan’s expected 2015 presidential run is evoking hostility in the north, as expected, but also in the south, where it is feared that Jonathan, a Bayelsa southerner, may be ousted from office. Although the region perceives itself as marginalized by the state and federal government, some Delta youths have an even greater fear of a northern presidency and have threatened war should the presidency switch back to the north (*This Day* [Lagos], September 9). Separately, one of the original MEND leaders, Asari Dokubo, has likewise warned of bloodshed should Jonathan not retain the presidency (*Premium Times* [Abuja], September 9).

Despite these political issues and problems in the Delta, perspective needs to be kept. The capability of MEND and other disgruntled militants remains highly questionable, as evidenced by their inability to fulfill their threats against Chevron or perpetrate other violent acts as promised. Simply put, MEND is too weak and disjointed to conduct a focused campaign against energy installations for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the situation should not be dismissed. Unaddressed, long-standing grievances in this volatile region could, with scant provocation, erupt into yet another cycle of deadly violence.

Nonetheless, the government’s response has been tacit dismissal of the problem. In an effective hand-washing of the matter, the Special Assistant to the President on the Amnesty Program, Kingsley Kuku, has on several occasions claimed to have successfully fulfilled the mandate of the amnesty, citing as success the return of oil production to pre-amnesty levels while ignoring the fundamental drivers of instability in the region (*This Day* [Abuja], February 17; July 17). Aside from the blatant disregard for one of the fundamental purposes of a government, i.e. the provision of law and order, such statements by the governing elite exemplify their continued abrogation of responsibility for the Niger Delta’s development as it concerns the center. As substantive improvements to the delta can only arise from the central federal government, this bodes ominous not only for the region, but also for the future of the nation.

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Notes

1. Risk Intelligence, *Gulf of Guinea Tanker Hijacking Report*, <http://www.riskintelligence.eu/news/>.

2. A summary of the main points is available at: International Maritime Bureau, October 17, 2013: <http://www.icc-ccs.org/news/873-piracy-at-sea-falls-to-lowest-level-in-seven-years-reports-imb>.

AQAP Resilience Exposes the Weakness of Yemen's Security Apparatus

Ludovico Carlino

Using an explosives-laden vehicle, a suicide bomber targeted the gate of Yemen's 111th Army Brigade base in Ahwar, Abyan province, on October 18, while a commando of a dozen militants simultaneously stormed the camp with machine guns and RPGs (Barakish, [Sana'a], October 18; Yemen Post, October 20). A dozen Yemeni soldiers were killed and 15 others injured in the latest coordinated assault carried out by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) against army posts and compounds in the country's south, a pattern that shows both the group's resistance to the on-going military crackdown and the worrying weakness of Yemen's security apparatus (*al-Sahwa* [Sana'a], October 18).

Between July and October, AQAP militants successfully launched at least seven high-profile attacks on military camps across the southern governorates:

- On July 23, jihadi militants used RPGs and mortars against the Political Security Organization (PSO) headquarters in al-Hawta, Lahij governorate, without causing any casualties (Marebpress.net, July 24).
- On September 6, suspected AQAP militants shelled the camp of the Third Military District in Ma'rib city (Barakish, September 6).
- On September 12, the First Military Region headquarters in Seyoun, Hadramawt governorate, was shelled with mortar fire (*al-Sahwa*, September 12).
- On September 20, AQAP militants launched a coordinated attack using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) against a military camp in al-Nashama, Shabwah governorate, killing at least 25 soldiers. On the same day, an AQAP commando

attacked an army base in Mayfa, Shabwa, killing eight special forces soldiers, kidnapping five army officers and stealing several military vehicles (Barakish, September 20; *Yemen Today*, September 21).

- On September 30, AQAP militants wearing military uniforms seized the Yemeni Army's Second Military District headquarters in al-Mukalla, Hadramawt. After a three-day standoff, an army raid supported by counter-terrorism units to recapture the compound resulted in the deaths of 25 militants and 10 soldiers (Honahadhramout.com, September 30; Hadrmoutpress.com, September 30; Marebpress.net, October 4; see Terrorism Monitor Brief, October 18).
- On October 14, AQAP militants wearing military uniforms attacked a camp of the newly-formed special security forces in al-Hawta, Lahij, killing three soldiers (Alwatanye.net, October 14).

While this series of attacks seems to suggest a strategic move by AQAP aimed at supplementing its relentless assassination campaign on security and army personnel with higher-profile attacks targeting security assets, it also indicates how AQAP is gradually recovering its ability to stage major operations that take advantage of its inroads in the southern governorates. Besides its traditional strongholds in Shabwah, Hadramawt and Abyan, where according to security officials the group continues to train militants and keeps a large arsenal of weapons, AQAP is also extending its presence in the central al-Baydah governorate (*Yemen Times*, November 5). Here, according to Colonel Hamoud al-Amari, the Army's commander in the province, around 700 militants have found shelter in the Ra'da, al-Zahir, Almikras and Alhd districts (*Yemen Times*, October 8). The control of al-Baydah represents a strategic corridor for mounting AQAP operations further north, especially in the capital, Sana'a, where the number of AQAP attacks has increased in the last few months. On August 22, security forces discovered and defused five IEDs planted in the Parliament building; on August 25, a bomb planted on a bus transporting Air Force officers to al Daylami air base exploded killing at least one soldier; on October 6, suspected AQAP gunmen failed in an attempt to kidnap the German ambassador, but killed his bodyguard (Yaspr.net, August 23; Sabanews, August 25; *Okaz* [Jeddah], August 26; al-Jazeera, October 6).

Although AQAP operations in the capital have not reached the same level of effectiveness demonstrated in the south, the overall militant campaign is pointing to an increased level of sophistication. Jihadi militants are resorting more frequently to coordinated assaults aimed at taking control of strategic military bases, with AQAP commandos wearing military uniforms, using heavy weapons and unmanned VBIEDs to

attack the bases' gates before breaching the compound. In August, security forces claimed to have thwarted an AQAP plot using militants posing as protesting soldiers to take over strategic locations in Ghayl Ba Wazir, Mukalla, and Belhaf (*Barakish*, August 7). The plot included IED attacks on natural gas and oil pipelines and the killing of foreign experts working at the Mukalla and Belhaf energy facilities (*Barakish*, August 7). Although attacks on oil and gas assets in Yemen are generally a prerogative of local tribes, especially in Ma'rib, as a tool to exert concessions from the central Government, further episodes suggest that AQAP is looking increasingly at oil infrastructure as a potential target. On August 11, AQAP militants killed five soldiers during an attack on oil and gas facilities in Radhum, Shabwah province, (*Barakish*, August 11). On September 13, AQAP elements attacked soldiers guarding oil tankers in Wadi 'Ayn, Hadramawt, killing 9 and injuring 8 (Marebpress.net, September 14). On September 20, security forces defused a VBIED allegedly parked by AQAP operatives in front of the Belhaf gas facility (*Yaspr*, September 21).

AQAP's successful attacks on military targets demonstrate the group's ability to recover from three major military offensives and the on-going ground and aerial campaigns against AQAP militants. Most worryingly, AQAP resilience is fostered by the central government's failure to assert its presence and authority in several areas of the country and is facilitated by the increasing number of episodes pointing to the complicity of security personnel with militants, which risks undermining the overall efforts to quash the group's militant activities. In Rada'a district (al-Bayda governorate), residents reportedly turned to AQAP to mediate their disputes because the government is not considered capable of doing so. While local authorities said Rada'a needs at least 6,000 soldiers to maintain security, the district has just 1,500 soldiers (*Yemen Times*, October 8; October 10). Similar assessments were given for Abyan, where four army brigades have often been out-gunned by the militants they are fighting, and for Ma'rib, where according to a report by the Yemeni Army the increase in the attacks on oil and gas infrastructures was a result of five military brigades being withdrawn from the central military region (*Yemen Times*, November 5, *al-Bald News* [al-Mukalla], October 8).

If the inability to guarantee higher levels of security is a symptom of the general political crisis still entangling the Yemeni government, the arrest of seven army officers at the Second Military District HQ in Mukalla on charges of having spied for AQAP and facilitating the September 30 attack on the building represents the most prominent case of complicity between militants and elements of the security apparatus (*Barakish*, October 3). The case is not isolated,

however; Abyan Popular Committee members claimed, for instance, that some military forces are conspiring with AQAP and they are providing the militants with military uniforms (*Yemen Times*, October 24). Further, official documents quoted in local media revealed that Yemeni customs officials allowed AQAP to import around 700 cars without valid identification numbers, which provide the only way to trace a VBIED to its owner (HourNews.net, October 24). These episodes reiterate the multiple challenges the Yemeni administration still has to face in its attempt to eradicate AQAP presence in the country, an effort that should include a more effective strategy to deal with those cases of connivance between officials and militants that risk frustrating any future progress in the battle against the group.

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The Day After: Iran's Quiet Taliban Diplomacy Reflects Preparations for a Post-U.S. Afghanistan

Chris Zambelis

In many respects, the ascendance of Hassan Rouhani to the Iranian presidency has raised optimism for the prospects of a limited rapprochement between the United States and Iran. This is the case even as the United States and Iran stand diametrically opposed on a host of critical issues. Analysts and journalists continue to pay close attention to the peculiarities of Iranian foreign policy, with subjects such as the diplomacy surrounding its nuclear ambitions, its alliances with the Ba'athist regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon and its rivalry with Israel and Saudi Arabia tending to attract the most coverage. In contrast, Iran's posture toward its eastern neighbor Afghanistan has received short shrift. In light of the ongoing drawdown of the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)/International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployment and plans to end the U.S. combat role in Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the future of Afghanistan is very much in question.

Given the historic animosity between Iran and the Taliban and Iran's avowed friendship with the regime of Afghan president Hamid Karzai, signs that the longtime enemies may have forged ahead with a quiet diplomatic track independent of other political proceedings have fueled speculation about

Iran's intentions toward Afghanistan. These developments have surfaced at a particularly difficult juncture for the Karzai regime. To date, the Karzai regime's attempts to engage the Taliban in peace talks have proved fruitless. While the Taliban has accepted the principle of peace negotiations, it has rejected Kabul's advances. Its official position is that it will not enter into formal peace talks with its Afghan adversaries while foreign troops are in Afghanistan (TOLO News [Kabul], June 23; al-Jazeera [Doha], June 19). These reports have also come during a period of heightened tensions between Washington and Kabul over a number of issues. The Karzai regime has raised concerns regarding the scope of U.S. military activities in Afghanistan and Washington's diplomatic approach to the Taliban. The United States has signaled its readiness to engage the Taliban in fostering a peace agreement, acquiescing in principle in 2012 to the establishment of a formal representation in Doha, Qatar, to facilitate the Taliban's participation in peace negotiations with Kabul (see Terrorism Monitor, February 12, 2012).

Afghan authorities have raised concerns about Iran's motives in dealing with the Taliban through the Qatar-based representation. The Karzai regime perceives attempts by foreign outside actors, such as Iran and the United States, to interact unilaterally with the Taliban as an affront to its sovereignty and legitimacy (*Hasht-e-Sobh* [Kabul], June 4). The Karzai regime is furious over a number of actions taken by the Taliban's Qatar-based representatives, such as the Taliban's decision to hoist its flag outside of its Doha office along with a sign reading "Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." The office was supposed to have opened as the "Afghan Taliban Political Office in Doha." For Kabul, these actions demonstrate the Taliban's true intention: operating a shadow government-in-exile to undermine Kabul's authority (TOLO News, June 24). The timing of the Taliban's provocative actions in Qatar is also telling. In an attempt to humiliate the Karzai regime, they coincided with NATO's formal handover of security responsibilities to Afghan authorities (TOLO News, June 24; al-Jazeera, June 18). Reports of diplomatic contacts between Iran and the Taliban have also occurred amid efforts between Pakistan and the Taliban's ideological progeny the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to begin peace talks (*Dawn* [Karachi], May 23). Given this context, reports suggesting that the Taliban dispatched a diplomatic delegation to Tehran in late May to participate in secret talks with Iranian officials merit closer scrutiny (Fars News Agency [Tehran], June 1).

Mixed Signals

Iran and the Taliban have issued different accounts of the circumstances behind their alleged talks. Iran's Fars

News Agency was the first media outlet to report on the meetings, though the report did not disclose many details about the nature of the meetings. However, it did state that the Taliban delegation met with Iranian security officials and underlined Iran's commitment toward fostering peace in Afghanistan. The report also mentioned that a separate delegation of Taliban officials had traveled to Iran earlier in the year to attend Iran's annual Islamic Awakening conference in April (Fars News Agency, June 1). The political delegation representing the Taliban is said to have consisted of Sayyid Tayyab Agha, Mawlawi Shabuddin Delawar and Shir Muhammad Abbas Stanekzai, although some reports claimed that additional officials travelled with the delegation (*Arman-e-Melli* [Kabul], June 12; Fars News Agency, June 1). These three representatives operate out of the Taliban's formal political mission in Qatar, which was inaugurated in June (al-Jazeera, June 18). Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Abbas Araqchi dismissed reports that the aforementioned talks had taken place (Press TV [Tehran], June 2). In a possible attempt to divert attention away from the events in Tehran while also assuaging the concerns of the Karzai regime, Iran announced that it opposed the principle of discussions between the United States and the Taliban and any other proceedings that do not include the active participation of Kabul (Press TV, June 22).

While Iran has remained coy about its dealings with the Taliban, an official statement issued by the Voice of Jihad, the official website of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (a.k.a. the Afghan Taliban), provided further details. In the statement, Taliban spokesman Qari Muhammad Yusuf Ahmadi confirmed the initial reports published in Iranian media describing the aforementioned diplomatic meetings to discuss what he called "issues of mutual interest." The statement did not contain additional details about the topics discussed during the purported diplomatic talks. It did acknowledge that Taliban representatives delivered a speech during the Islamic Awakening Conference that addressed a variety of topics, including the political demands of the Taliban, the current situation in Afghanistan and the plight of Afghan refugees in Iran. The statement added that the Taliban had previously participated in international forums held in France and Japan and that the Islamic Emirate is eager to cooperate with its neighbors on the basis of "mutual respect." [1] Iran has hosted Taliban delegations during previous Islamic Awakening Conferences that included former ranking members of the organization. Iran's dealings with the Taliban in this capacity are likely to have been intended to cultivate influence within the various Taliban factions and to outflank other major actors with a stake in Afghanistan (such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) in the lead-up to a negotiated peace framework to end the war in

Afghanistan (al-Jazeera, January 3, 2012).

Afghan media reactions reflected the uncertainty surrounding the purported meetings by offering varied descriptions of the events in question. According to one account, the Taliban officials dispatched to Tehran were operating under what was labeled to be “great U.S. influence.” The same report also stated that Iranian officials implored their Afghan counterparts to devote themselves to politics and participate in the upcoming presidential elections scheduled to be held in April, 2014 (*Weesa* [Kabul], June 9). Another report alleged that the Taliban operates an official liaison office in Tehran. The same report also suggested that the extent of the political relationship between Iran and the Taliban includes regular contacts (Afghan Channel 1 [Kabul], June 2).

Background to Rapprochement

Enmity has marked Iran’s relationship with the Taliban over the years. The Taliban’s style of ultraconservative Sunni fundamentalism has always been hostile to Shia Iran. The Taliban view Shia believers as heretics and apostates. The Taliban’s brutal treatment of Afghan Shia minorities such as the ethnic Hazara community, which has endured persecution and atrocities, reveals the extent of its hostility toward Shia Islam. Iran threatened to invade Afghanistan in 1998 following the Taliban’s killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif in September of that year. Iran’s longtime support in coordination with Russia and India for the opposition Northern Alliance – the numerous militias that resisted Taliban rule from parts of northern Afghanistan over the years leading up to the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, is another source of antagonism between Iran and the Taliban. Iran’s antipathy for the Taliban was strong enough to disregard its hostility towards the United States: Iran lent the United States intelligence support to aid the U.S. objective of toppling the Taliban and neutralizing al-Qaeda during Operation Enduring Freedom. Iran quickly emerged as an important source of diplomatic, economic and humanitarian support to the U.S.-backed Karzai government. In regards to their shared antipathy towards the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Iranian and U.S. interests on Afghanistan, on the surface, have largely converged. However, the steady upsurge in tension between Iran and the United States, combined with a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, would eventually raise questions about possible Iranian involvement in aiding and abetting Taliban operations targeting U.S. forces (see *Terrorism Monitor*, November 6, 2009).

Geopolitical Considerations

Questions remain regarding the extent (or veracity) of the

political contacts forged between Iran and the Taliban in recent months. Nevertheless, what is clear is that Iran’s interests and influence in Afghanistan are extensive. A sizeable segment of Iran’s population shares ethnic, cultural, religious and language ties with millions of Afghans. As a consequence of their geographic proximity, the deterioration of Afghanistan has impacted Iran profoundly on numerous levels. Over one million Afghan refugees currently reside in Iran (Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR), November 1). The expansion of the Afghan opium trade – Afghanistan is the world’s largest producer – is blamed for being a contributing factor in the high prevalence of opium consumption among Iranians. Iran is widely believed to have the highest rate of opium addicts per capita in the world (*Economist* [London], August 13). Iran also struggles to secure its border with Afghanistan, which serves as a busy transit point for narcotics, arms and human smugglers. These issues remain points of contention between Iran and the Taliban even while both sides appear to be engaging in back-channel diplomacy. For example, the Taliban publicly condemned Iran for the killing of Afghan migrants in May by Iranian security officers who had strayed into Iranian territory from Afghanistan. The Taliban also advised Iran to approach future incidents through a consideration of neighborly rights and Islamic values. [2]

The fluctuating geopolitics of the Middle East is also shaping Iran’s approach toward the Taliban. Given their history of animosity, Iran has an interest in mitigating potential security threats emanating from the Taliban. Iran is wary of a resurgent Taliban that is likely to emerge as the dominant actor in Afghanistan (and, potentially, Pakistan) following the withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO forces. The growing politicization of sectarianism in the Middle East is also affecting Iran’s outlook. Iran’s support for Syria and Hezbollah has rendered it a target of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies that are themselves lending supporting to hardline Salafist and other Sunni extremist currents around the Arab world and greater Middle East.

Iran is experiencing a renewed bout of terrorist and insurgent violence in its southeastern province of Sistan-Balochistan by an obscure militant current that blends ethnic Baloch nationalism with an extremist Salafist discourse that is virulently anti-Shia and evocative of al-Qaeda’s kind of radicalism. The emergence of the *Harakat Ansar Iran* (Movement of the Partisans of Iran) and, more recently, *Jaysh al-Adl* (Army of Justice), appear to seek inspiration from the now defunct *Jundallah* (Soldiers of God) movement that was implicated in scores of attacks against Iranian security and civilian targets in recent years. Iran has accused Saudi Arabia, among others, of supporting these organizations

(al-Jazeera, November 7; see Terrorism Monitor, November 15, 2012). Saudi Arabia was one of only three countries (the other two being Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) to have recognized the Taliban before the September 11, 2001, attacks. As a result, Iran would be well served to reach an accommodation with the Taliban, even on limited terms, so as to outmaneuver Saudi Arabia on issues that affect Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria.

On a more subtle level, Iran is also looking to position itself as an indispensable force for stability in Afghanistan following the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces. This amplifies Iran's diplomatic leverage on a host of issues that extend beyond Afghanistan, including future deliberations over its nuclear program, the future of Syria and the removal of economic sanctions. Iran is also likely to be looking to bolster its position in light of growing regional and international interests – political, security, and economic – that are rapidly expanding their respective footholds in Afghanistan, particularly those of Pakistan, China, India and Russia (*National* [Abu Dhabi], May 5). By the same token, Iran may also be seeking to cultivate contacts and sympathetic figures within the Taliban should the situation in Afghanistan destabilize further after the eventual withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO forces.

Conclusion

For its part, the Taliban also seems committed to working with Iran for the purposes of enhancing its diplomatic leverage in the current political environment with an eye on the day after the foreign forces depart Afghanistan. The Taliban may also be trying to weaken Iran's relationship with the Karzai regime and other traditionally anti-Taliban factions. According to one assessment, the Taliban's outreach to Iran is designed to persuade Iran to refrain from providing support to anti-Taliban forces when foreign forces leave Afghanistan. The Taliban delegation is reported to have assured its Iranian counterparts that factions representing different ethnic, religious and political groups will be formally represented in any future post-NATO order (Pajhwok Afghan News [Kabul], June 3). Moreover, the political optics surrounding its alleged dealings with Iran was not lost on the Taliban. Cognizant of the Karzai regime's current difficulties and its unease over the progression of regional diplomacy toward a peace agreement in Afghanistan, the Taliban touted a sampling of observations produced by analysts and journalists that present its position in a positive light in contrast to Kabul's diminishing prospects in a report issued on its official website. [3] The report highlighted commentary published by Western and regional media outlets that portrayed the

Taliban's recent dealings with Iran as a sign of its growing international legitimacy in contrast to Kabul's declining diplomatic leverage and growing nervousness over the course of regional events. It also referenced reports that described the Taliban's representation in Qatar as serving the role of an official embassy.

Uncertainty continues to cloud the claims describing Iran's back-channel exchanges with the Taliban. But the political sensitivities involved are conducive to surreptitious dealings, even on matters of great strategic importance. With Afghanistan expected to endure an especially tense and difficult 2014, its long-term future is as likely to be shaped by decisions concluded behind closed doors as ones made in the view of the Afghan public.

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Notes

1. See "Remarks of Qari Yousuf Ahmadi regarding visits to the Islamic Republic of Iran by delegations of Islamic Emirate," Voice of Jihad (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), June 4, 2013, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/32277-remarks-of-qari-yousuf-ahmadi-regarding-visits-to-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-by-delegations-of-islamic-emirate>.
2. See "Declaration of the Islamic Emirate regarding the incidents in the border regions with Iran and Pakistan," Voice of Jihad (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), May 13, 2013, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/31413-declaration-of-the-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-incidents-in-the-border-regions-with-iran-and-pakistan>.
3. See "The official visit of Taliban to Iran in the eyes of the analysts," Voice of Jihad (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), June 10, 2013, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/articles/32565-the-official-visit-of-taliban-to-iran-in-the-eyes-of-the-analysts> (accessed November 2013).