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Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis claimed an attack on Egypt minister in September (Source al-Jazeera)

ANSAR BAYT AL-MAQDIS INTENSIFIES ASSASSINATION CAMPAIGN IN THE SINAI

Andrew McGregor

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) is the Egyptian branch of a Gazan Islamist organization that first appeared in the Sinai in the days after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Since then, ABM has become one of the most active and aggressive of the many militant groups now found in the Sinai. Its latest high-profile operation was the November 17 assassination in Nasr City of Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Mabrouk Abu Khattab of Egypt's National Security Agency (NSA), one of the leading investigators involved in the prosecution of ex-president Muhammad Mursi and other leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the past, ABM has mounted several attacks on the pipelines that carry Egyptian natural gas to Israeli and Jordanian markets, claimed responsibility for an attack on Israeli troops in September, 2012 and attempted to assassinate Egyptian Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim on September 5 (Daily News Egypt, July 26, 2012).

In its claim of responsibility for the murder of Colonel Mabrouk, ABM maintained that it had targeted the senior investigator over the commitment to trial in Alexandria of 15 women and seven girls for participation in a violent pro-Mursi demonstration in Alexandria in October: "[Mabrouk] was one of the major tyrants of the state security apparatus and the assassination was a response to the arrest of free women by this malicious apparatus." The statement ended by promising further attacks if the women were not freed. [1] Given Mabrouk's peripheral connection with the Alexandria case, prosecutors suspected the ABM statement was intended to mislead their investigations and asked the Interior Ministry to investigate the declaration (*al-Masry al-Youm*, November 21).

Suspicion of complicity in the assassination has fallen on the Muslim Brotherhood, which condemned the attack on November 19 and assailed efforts by the media

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to associate them with the assassination (Daily News Egypt, November 20). The timing of Mabrouk's murder is noteworthy, as it came shortly before his testimony in the Mursi trial and a week after submitting a CD supporting the charges of spying leveled against the ex-president. Judicial sources have indicated that the CD includes a recording of a phone call between Mursi and al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as another phone conversation in which Mursi admits to providing Hamas with information on the security situation in the Sinai (*al-Masry al-Youm*, November 21). Colonel Mabrouk played a central role in taking down the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, arresting leading members such as Khayrat al-Shater, Essam al-Erian and Muhammad al-Beltagy. The spying charges actually predate Mursi's removal as president; the case accusing Mursi and 13 other members of the Muslim Brotherhood of spying and illegal contacts with foreign entities was forwarded to prosecutors by the Ismailia Appeals Court on June 23 (*al-Ahram Weekly*, November 22). Mabrouk was also expected to be the chief witness in a separate case regarding Mursi's Hamas-assisted escape from Wadi al-Natrun prison five days after the January 25 Revolution.

According to the ABM statement, the killing was carried out by the Mu'tasim Bi-'llah Battalion. This ABM faction is named for al-Mu'tasim Bi-'llah, the eighth Abbasid caliph (795 – 842), known for his fighting skills and his campaigns against the Christian Byzantine Empire. As justification for the murder, the ABM statement cited an episode from the life of the Prophet Muhammad, in which the Prophet attacked and expelled the Jewish Banu Qaynuqa tribe after an incident in the market in which a Jewish goldsmith is said to have pinned the clothes of a Muslim woman so as to cause her to be stripped naked when she walked away. The Jewish merchant was immediately killed by a passing Muslim, who was in turn killed by a Jewish mob, leading to the Prophet's eventual attack. [2] ABM asks, on the basis of this precedent, what alternative do Muslims have when faced with the detention and assault of hundreds of Muslim women?

Mabrouk's funeral was attended by Prime Minister Hazem al-Beblawi, Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim and several other ministers and high officials. A three-day mourning period was announced by interim president Adli Mansour on November 20 (Egypt State Information Service, November 21). The Interior Ministry claims 152 "martyrs" have been lost to militant activities since Mursi's June 30 overthrow.

Colonel Mabrouk was only the latest in a series of Interior Ministry personnel (many of whom conceal their identities and rarely work in the field) to be targeted by assassins. Revelations of the existence of "assassination lists" with

the home addresses of intelligence officers involved in the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood are reported to have prompted a deadline of January for Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim to discover the leak in his Ministry (Ahram Online [Cairo], November 22; *al-Ahram Weekly* [Cairo], November 22).

On November 21, police in the Delta town of Qaha raided an apartment in search of two suspected terrorists wanted in connection to the murder of Colonel Mabrouk, the attempted assassination of Interior Minister Ibrahim and an attack on a Coptic church. The two were arrested only after a gunfight that killed police Captain Ahmad Samir al-Kabir (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], November 21; November 22).

On the following day, the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior announced the arrest of the prime suspect in the Mabrouk assassination, Shady al-Manei, described as a leading member of Bayt al-Maqdis. Al-Manei was alleged to be a subordinate of Muslim Brotherhood deputy guide Muhammad Khayrat al-Shater (presently detained) and was previously imprisoned in connection with the 2005 Taba bombings before being released by ex-president Muhammad Mursi (Egypt State Information Service, November 23). Nabil Na'im, a fierce opponent of the Muslim Brotherhood and leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad from 1988 to 1992, has accused al-Shater, a prominent businessman, of funding ABM's strikes on Egyptian security forces (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], September 9; for Khayrat al-Shater, see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, September 2013).

The Egyptian Army has not failed to respond to the ABM's attacks on security personnel. On November 26, four black Army Humvees pursued and killed Shaykh Abu Munir (a.k.a. Muhammad Hussein Muhareb) and his son at al-Mehediya in the northeast Sinai. Abu Munir was an associate of ABM and a prime suspect in the brutal roadside murder of 25 police recruits dragged from their bus in August (*Aswat Masriya* [Cairo], November 26; *Telegraph*, November 26).

On November 20, ABM released the identity of the suicide bomber who attacked the South Sinai security directorate on October 7, killing five soldiers and wounding 50 others. The "martyr," Muhammad Hamdan al-Sawarka (a.k.a. Abu Hajer), was a member of the Sawarka tribe, one of the Sinai's largest. The ABM statement also criticized prominent Egyptian Salafist leaders for failing to resist the overthrow of Muhammad Mursi (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], November 20).

In his assessment of the Sinai campaign of the Egyptian security forces, Dr. Najih Ibrahim, a founding member of the

extremist al-Gama'a al-Islamiya who has since renounced political violence, commented:

This campaign has largely succeeded. Without it, Egypt would have witnessed a long series of car bombings. We must admit that this military campaign prevented the arrival of this danger to the Nile Delta and to Cairo in a major way. Extremists in Sinai can equip a thousand booby-trapped cars and dispatch them to other areas in Egypt. The military campaign destroyed many mine and weapons stockpiles, and many of those who committed terrorist attacks were arrested. Many smuggling tunnels were closed and the sources of funding for these groups in the Sinai were controlled (*As-Safir* [Cairo], November 25).

Notes

1. Jama'at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, "Declaring our responsibility for assassinating the criminal Muhammad Mabrouk," November 19, 2013, <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=47326>.
2. The incident is related in Ibn Hisham's (died c. 830) *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, an edited version of Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet Muhammad (now lost).

LIBYAN SPECIAL FORCES EXPEL ANSAR AL-SHARI'A FROM BENGHAZI

Andrew McGregor

There are conflicting accounts of how the clashes began, but some sort of minor contact between gunmen of Benghazi's Ansar al-Shari'a and soldiers of the Libyan Saiqa Special Forces Brigade early on November 25 set off heavy fighting that left nine dead and 49 wounded but saw the long-desired expulsion of Ansar al-Shari'a from the city by the end of the day. Ansar al-Shari'a is believed to have been responsible for the 2012 attack on the American consulate in Benghazi that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens. After being previously driven from its Benghazi bases by public demonstrations in September 2012, Ansar al-Shari'a returned quietly five months later, promoting themselves as providers of humanitarian aid, public services and security in a city still struggling to establish an effective administration.

There was a danger during the fighting that Islamist reinforcements might arrive from other Ansar al-Shari'a

bases in nearby Derna (where an ongoing assassination campaign has targeted everyone from judges to traffic police) or Ajdabiya, but security officials issued a warning that any convoy attempting to enter or leave Benghazi would be treated as an illegal militia and targeted by military aircraft. The Ansar al-Shari'a militants in Derna are led by Abu Sufyan bin Qumu, a former Guantanamo Bay inmate who was released to Libyan custody in 2007. A column of ten Ansar al-Shari'a "technicals" (gun-mounted 4x4s) attempting to leave Derna for Benghazi were turned back by Libyan Army units from al-Marj and Beida. Two other Islamist militias in Derna, the Abu Salim Brigade and the Army of the Islamic State of Libya, remained at their bases (Libya Herald, November 26).

Ansar al-Shari'a's detachment in Ajdabiya was forced out of the town on the same day by armed civilians (Libyan News Agency, November 25). Armed civilians also joined the effort to expel Ansar al-Shari'a in Benghazi, but were asked to return home by Saiqa commander Wanis Bukhamada (Libya Herald, November 25). Ansar al-Shari'a also has bases further afield in Misrata and Sirte, but access to Benghazi from the latter base was prevented by a roadblock set up at Wadi Ahmar by the newly created Barqa defense force, the armed element of autonomy-seeking Cyrenaicans in eastern Libya (Libya Herald, November 25; for the Cyrenaican autonomy movement, see *Terrorism Monitor*, October 31).

Violence returned to the streets of Benghazi on the evening of November 26 - 27 as gunmen threw grenades and clashed with the Libyan Army in three parts of the city. The situation was brought under control as reinforcements were sent to the affected areas. Ansar al-Shari'a elements were suspected, but security spokesmen admitted they were unsure who was responsible (Libya Herald, November 26; Reuters, November 27). Three soldiers were assassinated in Benghazi the same day by unknown assailants.

Laws 27 and 53 of Libya's ruling General National Council (GNC) call on all Libya's militias to disband or join the national army by the end of the year. However, this raises the possibility of large numbers of new additions bringing an extremist ideology with them as they are integrated into a national military. Saiqa commander Wanis Bukhamada has promised his Special Forces would use force against any militia that failed to disband and attacked the police and army after that date (Libya Herald, November 26). Bukhamada is a former officer under the Qaddafi regime who defected to the rebels during the revolution and led the liberation of Brega.

There are signs that the security situation in Libya's two major cities may be shifting in favor of those seeking the removal of

the militias from the streets. Most of Tripoli's warring militias left the city after the Misrata militia discredited its claims to be protecting the people of Tripoli when its fighters opened fire on peaceful demonstrators calling for their removal on November 15, killing 46 and wounding more than 500 more (Ahrām Online [Cairo], November 26).

On the same day as the Benghazi clashes, a representative of Ansar al-Shari'a appeared on Libyan TV to announce that all those who chose not to comply with Shari'a in Libya would be fought and killed, as would the French and anyone seeking democracy or secularism. Derna-based commander Mahmoud al-Barassi fueled the GNC's efforts to disband the militias by saying the GNC and the Army are apostates, insisting Prime Minister Ali Zeidan knows "nothing about Islam" and claiming that all opponents of Ansar al-Shari'a are "enemies." Other elements of Ansar al-Shari'a were believed to have gone into damage control after al-Barassi's remarks (Libya al-Ahrar TV, November 25; Libya Herald, November 25).

Foreign Fighters in Somalia and al-Shabaab's Internal Purge

Raffaello Pantucci and A.R. Sayyid

The role of foreign fighters in al-Shabaab was brought to public attention once again in October with the release by al-Kata'ib (Shabaab's media wing) of a video entitled: "It's an eye for an eye: the Woolwich attacks." [1] The video featured ten British jihadis who had died fighting alongside al-Shabaab as well as one Somali-Norwegian shown carrying out the massacre at Nairobi's Westgate Mall. The video appeared to confirm the prominent role of foreigners inside the East African terrorist networks (*Telegraph*, October 25; BBC, October 18). The reality, however, is more complicated, with evidence indicating that the size of the foreign fighter contingent in East Africa has been in flux, with a number dying in a complicated internal struggle from which Ahmad Abdi Godane (a.k.a. Abu Zubayr) has emerged victorious.

The most prominent casualty amongst this foreign fighter contingent was Omar Hammami, the American who rose within al-Shabaab to become its unofficial poster-boy. Increasingly angered by what he saw as the "authoritarian" approach adopted by Godane, he lashed out through videos and on his Twitter account, claiming he was under threat from the Shabaab leadership. Hammami survived one attempt on his life before succumbing to an assassin's

bullet on September 12. Dying alongside him was Osama al-Britani, a British-Pakistani national believed to be Habib Ghani, a long-standing British fighter in the region who was closely linked to the semi-mythical "white widow" Samantha Lewthwaite, widow of one of the July 7, 2005 bombers of London's underground system (*Daily Mail*, September 13).

The deaths of the two men came as the capstone of a series of foreign fighter deaths under mysterious circumstances. One of the first to fall was Bilal al-Berjawi, a British-Lebanese sub-commander within the group who was killed by a drone strike in January 22, 2012. A month later his companion Muhammad Sakr was also killed under similar circumstances. While the direct cause of death was clear, the circumstances that enabled the drones to find these individuals were not.

In an apparent attempt to clarify these circumstances, al-Kata'ib made the unusual step of releasing a video which purported to be a confession by a young Somali who claimed to have helped direct the drone strikes against Bilal al-Berjawi and Muhammad Sakr. The confessional video seemed aimed at emphasizing that the two men had died as the result of offensive operations by the group's enemies rather than executed by the group itself, suggesting there was some doubt that this was the case. [2]

Evidence of an internal dispute over the targeting of foreign fighters was found in other areas. For example, in the wake of al-Berjawi's death, there was a reported exodus of foreigners from Somalia. In late April 2013, senior leaders within the organization published a *fatwa* (legal pronouncement in Islam) specifically ordering that Omar Hammami, Osama al-Britani and Egyptian Khatab al-Masri not be targeted for assassination. [3] In mid-2010 there was still strong evidence that Westerners, from the UK at least, were providing a fairly steady stream of young warriors to join the Somali group, but the indicators over time have been negative. With the rise of jihad operations in Syria and other Arab Spring countries, young Westerners no longer saw the appeal of joining Godane's increasingly xenophobic jihad.

For its part, al-Shabaab appears more eager to reach out to the foreign community than before. The video "Woolwich Attack: It's an Eye for an Eye" came in the wake of a YouTube video published by the group that described the journey of a group from Minneapolis who left the United States to join al-Shabaab (the video has since been removed from the Internet). The video eulogized the fallen Westerners in a manner that seemed aimed at recruiting people to come to Somalia and to illustrate how the fight that al-Shabaab was undertaking was part of a larger conflict directed by core al-Qaeda.

Close examination of the videos and the records of the fallen men illustrates that these cases are, for the most part, historical rather than current. The Minneapolis group moved

from the United States to Somalia in a series of waves dating back to 2007. The known British fighters mentioned all seem to have travelled to the conflict before 2010. In some cases, court documents identify individuals who fought alongside al-Shabaab and then returned home. In others, networks back in the UK that were providing support and funding for fighters were disrupted, yielding information on when individuals left and how long they required financial support. [4] Some of those provided with support through these networks are now reported dead. One man, identified as “CF” in court documents, first tried to travel to Afghanistan to fight, but was dissuaded by the difficulties encountered in entering that country and instead settled for Somalia. [5]

Having said all of this, there is still some evidence that Godane retains the loyalty and support of some of his foreign cadres. Part of this is evidenced through various media outlets, like the pro-Godane Twitter feed @MYC_Press, which is widely speculated to be run by Samantha Lewthwaite. Whether run by Lewthwaite or not, the account is clearly written by someone whose mother tongue is colloquial British English. Similarly, all of the videos mentioned in this piece are narrated by Abu Omar, an English-speaking Shabaab fighter who has a very clear grasp of the languages and culture of the West, most likely indicating strong foreign links. In terms of the Westgate incident, the growing evidence of a strong link to Somali diaspora elements from Norway suggests the group is still able to call upon its foreign links to conduct audacious operations.

However, the dilemma remains about what role foreign fighters will have in the new organization being crafted by Godane. In April 2013, an open letter to al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri was released by Ibrahim al-Afghani (a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Zaylai), in which al-Afghani called for the al-Qaeda leader to step into an increasingly fractious battle within al-Shabaab that was threatening to tear the organization apart. At the heart of the division was a split between the local and international fighters, with the two groups divided over al-Shabaab’s direction (*African Review* [Nairobi], April 9, 2013). Interestingly, it seemed as though the foreign contingent was focused on consolidating power within Somalia, while the faction led by Godane was more interested in expanding al-Shabaab’s international reach, possibly to live up to its role as an al-Qaeda affiliate.

It is possibly within this split that we see the seeds of the Westgate incident as well as an explanation of the future role Godane sees for the foreign fighters in his group. While the Westgate plot clearly used assets within Kenya and is therefore in part a product of domestic radicalization issues inside Kenya, it was nevertheless directed and claimed by Godane’s al-Shabaab network. The intent was to mount a large-scale incident to attract international attention alongside other major international jihadist attacks, such as this year’s In Aménas attack, the 2008 Mumbai attack and other large-scale terrorist operations in which mass casualties have been

ascribed to al-Qaeda or its affiliates.

At the same time, the group’s latest video release pointed to an eagerness to place the Somali cause within a larger ideological arc (highlighting the causes of the Uyghur and Rohignya as examples where the West was proving it did not care about Muslims) and also called upon individuals to conduct terrorist plots in the West. Al-Shabaab has previously refrained from calling openly for such terrorist operations. Delivered clearly and coherently in English, the rhetorical shift is something clearly aimed at a Western audience.

The danger for Western security officials is that the group has finally made the long-awaited strategic decision to focus efforts outside of Somalia. At the same time, the decision to make this shift seems to come at a moment when the group is having less success in attracting Western fighters to its ranks, thus depriving them of the most effective tool to launch an attack in the heart of the West. With Syria currently dominating jihadists’ attention, this dynamic is unlikely to change substantially in the near future. In the longer-term, Godane’s clear interest in living up to his group’s al-Qaeda affiliation would suggest more incidents aimed at Western targets in Africa at least are likely.

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Notes

1. The video confession was posted in May 2013 and is available: http://ia600707.us.archive.org/22/items/3d-f7dhrhm-2/SoBeware2_HQ.m4v.
2. See <http://www.aljihad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=31152>.
3. Regina vs Mohammed Shabir Ali and Mohammed Shakif Ali, Central Criminal Court, August 1, 2012.
4. Secretary of State for the Home Department vs CC and CF, Royal Courts of Justice, October 19, 2012, [2012] EWHC 2837.

Turkey Faces Security Challenges and Political Dilemmas in the Syrian Conflict

Mohammad Salman and Farhan Zahid

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) is experiencing political stalemate as a consequence of its support for armed Islamist terrorist groups in the Syria. The party's policy is becoming dangerous and ambiguous. The primary concerns are related to two key issues: a possible rebound of the Kurdish problem and the increasing role of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the Syrian conflict. Both issues represent possible policy failures as Turkey's tacit approval of the use of its territory by international Islamist jihadists appears to have backfired.

A recent prisoner exchange in October demonstrated the close contacts between the Turkish government and Islamist groups in Syria and the influence Ankara has on the latter. With Turkish mediation, nine Lebanese Shiite prisoners (kidnapped by Sunni Islamists on their way to visit the religious shrines in Iran via Turkey and Syria) were swapped after a year of captivity for two Turkish pilots who had been kidnapped in Lebanon by militants demanding the release of the Shiite hostages (*al-Jazeera*, October 20).

Foreign jihadis are increasingly using Turkish territory to join their "brothers-in-arms" in Syria. Because of the easy access to Syria from the Turkish side of the border, the foreign jihadis prefer to travel to Turkey by air and then cross into Syria. Their passage through Turkish territory shows the tacit approval of the AKP government; though not sponsoring the jihadists, the AKP still enables and cooperates with them. The highways near the Turkish-Syrian border areas are controlled by Islamist terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda. A complete network is now in place for their boarding and lodging, administration, safe houses and transportation.

The goal of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS - an al-Qaeda affiliate) is to establish an Islamic state that combines the Sunni regions of Iraq and Syria under the Shari'a. Because of certain apocalyptic prophecies related to Syria, the jihadists are only too eager to join the fight against the Assad regime. Al-Qaeda's media wings have been capitalizing on these prophecies and articulately boasting such scenarios since the beginning of the conflict (*al-Quds* [Tunis], November 3).

For over a year, it appears that the Turkish government has turned a blind eye to the passage of jihadists through its

territory, allowing thousands to cross into Syria to swell the ranks of al-Qaeda-associated groups. The situation is grave and raises concerns about Islamist extremist groups taking over regions of northern Syria. The AKP's Syrian policy has created the dilemma of a NATO member country allowing the quasi-official presence of al-Qaeda operatives within NATO boundaries, raising the possibility of such operatives penetrating the neighboring Balkans before moving on into central Europe. For its part, Turkey strongly denies providing any facilities to the flow of extremists into Syria.

The militant Islamists have also clashed with Syrian Kurds in northern Syria and fought battles over territories currently under Kurdish control. The Syrian Kurd militias managed to defeat the Islamist militants, carving out more land from regions formerly under Islamist control in northern Syria. Leaders of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - PYD) have accused Ankara of training and arming radical Islamist Kurds to fight against the fellow Kurds in Syria (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 18).

The Kurds have asserted themselves as key players in the conflict, presenting another serious dilemma for Ankara, which seeks to bring the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan- PKK) to the negotiating table. The Turkish fears could encourage Kurdish militias to take more power in Syria. At the same time, Ankara does not feel comfortable with the fall of tracts of land on its borders to al-Qaeda-related groups. Turkey has expressed concerns Syrian Kurds may be trying to establish an autonomous region in northern Syria after the PYD raised its flag over the border town of Ras al-Ain on November 17 (*Today's Zaman* [Istanbul], November 18). The town was seized by the Kurdish militia last July.

Turkish authorities recently announced the seizure in southeast Turkey of a large quantity of chemicals that could be used in the manufacture of chemical weapons. The chemicals were en route to Syria in three trucks and were captured by Turkish security forces near the Syrian border. The spokesperson of the Turkish General Staff said in a November 4 statement that the seizure of chemicals took place in the town of Rihaniyya, near the Syrian border. Three suspects managed to flee but one of their accomplices was arrested (Russia Today, November 4; Middle East Monitor, November 5). Turkish police were warned in May that some Syrian rebels were looking to obtain materials needed for the manufacture of chemical weapons.

These events paved the way for harsh criticism of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's policies by Turkish opposition parties and media on the grounds they pose

a substantial threat to the internal security of the nation. Turkish newspapers such as *Radikal* have accused the AKP government of using tacit sponsorship of Islamist terrorists in Syria as an instrument of security policy (*Radikal* [Istanbul], November 8). The Turkish government also appears to be divided on the issue; on the one hand, Prime Minister Erdogan desires the continuation of policies vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict by providing “support and aid to the Free Syrian Army and the [opposition] Syrian National Coalition”; on the other hand, Turkish President Abdullah Gul has expressed his concerns regarding the presence of al-Qaeda-associated groups “spreading across Syria and posing a growing risk to its neighbors and the countries of Europe,” adding “I don’t think anybody would tolerate the presence of something like Afghanistan on the shores of the Mediterranean” (*al-Quds al-Arabi*, November 7; *Guardian*, November 3). Gul had brought up the issue during a September visit to the UN in New York, saying “the extremist groups are a source of great concern to our security... I warned all the related authorities in Turkey on this important issue” (*Thawra Alwehda* [Damascus] September 24).

The current scenario reflects a shift in Turkish policymakers’ frame of reference. Admitting “concerns” about the al-Qaeda presence and its growing influence along the border represents a political awakening. In the recent past, many states have repented their role as sponsors and enablers of terrorist groups. It’s usually only a matter of time until such armed non-state actors become too difficult to control and transform into violent threats to the state. It is a positive development that Turkish authorities, both civil and military, have started to realize and envision the role of Islamist insurgents in the future. Regardless of the conflict result in Syria, the remaining Islamist insurgents will look to find new grounds to advance their agenda. Consolidation of Kurdish control in the northern Syrian territories as a result of the conflict could heighten Turkish worries. This could pave the way for another wave of conflict with PKK and other Kurdish militant parties that are currently agreeable to the pursuit of a negotiated settlement to the 30-year-old conflict.

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Oil Exploration and Political Stalemate Threaten to Trigger Renewed Conflict in the Western Sahara

Andrew McGregor

The decades-long unresolved conflict over the Western Sahara threatens to heat up again as Algeria and Morocco dispute the future of the region and young members of the Sahrawi Polisario Front (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro - Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al-Hamra and Rio de Oro) urge a return to arms against Moroccan “occupiers” rather than spend further decades in refugee camps located in the remote Algerian desert. A general international indifference has preserved the political impasse, in which native Sahrawis demand a referendum on independence and the Moroccan administration offers regional autonomy within a “Greater Morocco.” Giving impetus to the return of the issue to international attention is the growing Moroccan exploitation of the Western Sahara’s resources, including phosphates, fisheries and, potentially, oil and gas. Omar Mansour, a member of the Polisario’s National Secretariat, has warned: “If the U.N. does not take this seriously to ensure self-determination and that human rights are respected, then we are heading towards a war with regional implications” (Reuters, April 22).

Background

The Polisario Front was established in May, 1973 with the intent of expelling Spanish colonialists from the colony of Spanish Sahara (1884 – 1973). It gained strength in 1975 when locally-raised Spanish troops began to desert to the Polisario with their weapons. When Spain calculated the cost of retaining the colony in a world increasingly unsympathetic to colonial projects, it decided to defy a UN resolution and simply abandon the region, ceding the larger part of the colony, Saguia al-Hamra, to Morocco, with part of the Rio de Oro going to Mauritania in the 1975 Madrid Tripartite Accords.

The native Sahrawi resistance proclaimed the independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976 in response, which Algeria soon recognized in the hope of preventing regional expansion by Morocco. The Sahrawis then launched a costly guerrilla campaign with Libyan support against both Morocco and Mauritania. By 1979, Mauritania, with limited resources and exhausted by years

of fierce desert fighting, decided to abandon its claim to the southern Rio de Oro after a military junta arranged a ceasefire, though Morocco quickly stepped in to expand its own claim to the entire Rio de Oro. The Polisario Front was recognized by the UN as the official representative of the Sahrawi people in the same year. The Sahrawis' conflict with Morocco became increasingly bitter, with both sides committing human rights abuses in a war the international community barely noticed.

Rabat offered to hold a referendum on independence in 1981, but soon withdrew the offer, deciding instead to build a huge and heavily garrisoned sand berm to isolate the Polisario guerrillas in the economically useless and uninhabited regions of the former colony. 1250 miles long and 15 to 30 feet high, the berm is equipped with sensors, landmines and surveillance equipment; any attempt to cross the berm brings out Moroccan fighter jets ready to attack infiltrators in open country. The berm separates inhabitable, resource rich land near the coast from the largely lifeless desert to which the rebel Sahrawis fled in the 1970s and 1980s.

This tactic effectively ended Polisario strikes in the Moroccan-held Western Sahara and forced a 1989 ceasefire. A 1991 ceasefire agreement called for a UN referendum asking Sahrawis whether they wanted independence or integration into Morocco. However, preparations for the referendum broke down when UN organizers experienced difficulty in determining who was or wasn't eligible to vote from amongst the scattered Sahrawi population. By this time, Morocco preferred the facts on the ground and has yet to conduct the referendum. Disappointed Polisario leaders have since referred to their homeland as "the last colony in Africa" (Sahara Press Service [al-Aaiun], October 31).

Growing Anger in the Refugee Camps

Cut off from the inhabitable parts of the Western Sahara, the exiled Sahrawis now live in six refugee camps housing 150,000 people centered around the Algerian town of Tindouf, home to an Algerian military base. Twenty-six thousand additional refugees live in Mauritania. The four main camps are named for towns in the Western Sahara – al-Aaiun, Smara, Awserd and Dakhla. "February 27" is a small camp and the administration is run from the Rabouni camp. There are reports of widespread malnutrition and related illnesses in the camps, which rely largely on shipments of food and other aid from the international community (Sahara Press Service [El-Aaiun], November 13).

Political development in the refugee camps has calcified, with government remaining in the hands of an old guard led by

Muhammad Abdelaziz, who was elected as Polisario Front secretary-general and president of the Sahrawi Democratic Arab Republic in August 1976 and has remained in these posts ever since, ruling with the help of a small but powerful group of loyalists.

The sole political formation is the Polisario Front, a creation intended to put aside local political rivalries in the interests of presenting a common front demanding self-determination for the Western Sahara. However, this state of affairs is increasingly unable to restrain a growing number of youths (over 50 percent of the population in the camps is now under 18) who have never set foot in their "homeland," see no future in the refugee camps and are growingly inclined to resume the armed conflict with Morocco in the face of the apparent satisfaction of the international community with the status quo. As even President Abdelaziz concedes, "Patience has its limits" (Global Post, November 13).

Abdelaziz has been clear that renewing the armed conflict remains the legitimate right of Sahrawis, but is seeking to avoid new clashes with a far stronger power that could easily devastate the Sahrawi community in open warfare. Time is not working in favor of the Sahrawis holding out for independence in the refugee camps - with the gradual return of some refugees and a growing population of Moroccan migrants, the Western Saharan administrative capital of al-Aaiun alone now holds twice as many people as the combined refugee camps in Algeria.

Security in the camps is provided by Polisario internal security forces and the 6,000 to 7,000 man Ejercito de Liberación Popular Saharaui (ELPS - Sahrawi People's Liberation Army), the military wing of the Polisario Front. The ELPS fields a variety of vintage Soviet equipment donated by Algeria and a range of equipment captured from the Spanish, Moroccans and Mauritians. The Polisario administers its own justice and maintains its own detention facilities. Sahrawi dissidents accuse the movement of human rights abuses, including the torture and disappearance of dissidents (Sahara News, August 7).

Morocco has the upper hand in the constant propaganda warfare with the Polisario Front, disseminating its views and castigating the Polisario for alleged human rights abuses and purported ties to Islamist terrorist groups in a number of English-language websites designed to influence Western (especially American) opinion. For its part, the Polisario accuse Rabat of paying former refugees to produce lurid accounts of torture, illegal imprisonment and repression in the Polisario camps.

The Moroccan Approach

Morocco has devised a plan for regional autonomy as an alternative to holding a referendum on independence and has tried to gain international support for its claim by announcing an \$18 billion investment plan intended to double the region's GDP and create 120,000 jobs (African Energy, November 25).

Though efforts to obtain diplomatic recognition of its claim over the Western Sahara have faltered, Morocco has proceeded with the economic development of the territory based on an ambiguous legal ruling issued by the UN in 2002. Morocco inherited a major phosphates mining operation from Spain and is in negotiations with the EU to expand its fishing zone to include the profitable waters of Western Sahara. Now Kosmos Energy and partner Cairn Energy plan to begin oil exploration in a Moroccan-licensed offshore block next year. This latest development has enraged the Polisario Front, which stated that it was against “exploiting the sovereign resources of the Saharawi people without their consent while we remain under an illegal occupation... Western Sahara remains occupied as a matter of international law and so the taking of petroleum is clearly a war crime” (African Energy, November 25).

Diplomatic Tensions between Morocco and Algeria

Despite Morocco's efforts to depict an atmosphere of calm satisfaction in the Western Sahara, demonstrations in al-Aaiun demanding the immediate withdrawal of Moroccan forces from the Western Sahara and an end to resource exploitation in the region erupted into clashes with police as the protesters raised the banned Sahrawi flag during an October visit by Christopher Ross, the UN Secretary General's envoy to the Western Sahara (Sahara Press Service [al-Aaiun], November 12). The Polisario claimed over 100 injured during a crackdown by authorities, but local government in al-Aaiun claimed the incident involved only “children who wanted to throw stones at the security forces” (Agencia EFE [Madrid], October 20). Pro-Moroccan sources accused “infiltrators” of disguising themselves in Moroccan police uniforms before entering homes, abusing residents and looting valuables (Polisario-Confidential.org, October 24).

In an October 29 speech (read on his behalf by Algerian justice minister Tayeb Louh), Algerian president Abdelaziz urged new responsibilities for the UN peacekeeping force operating in the Western Sahara: “The necessity to set up a human rights monitoring mechanism in Western Sahara is more topical than ever... Algeria remains convinced that

the expansion of the MINURSO (Misión de las Naciones Unidas para la Organización de un Referéndum en el Sáhara Occidental - United Nations Mission for Referendum in Western Sahara) mandate to include human rights monitoring is a necessity” (Sahara Press Service [al-Aaiun], October 29). At present, MINURSO does not include human rights monitors amongst its roughly 250 uniformed and civilian personnel.

An outraged Morocco recalled its ambassador to Algeria on October 30, though Algiers described the move as “an unfortunate decision based on spurious motives and detrimental to the sovereignty of Algeria” (Institute for Security Studies [Addis Ababa], November 11). Bouteflika's remarks were interpreted by Moroccan foreign minister Salaheddine Mezouar as an indication of Algeria's direct involvement in trying to influence the West Sahara issue and its “calculated plans” to challenge Morocco's territorial integrity (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 8). Morocco's monarchist Istiqlal Party issued renewed calls for the government to retake the southeastern provinces of Tindouf and Bechar, transferred to Algeria by France during the colonial era. Algerian foreign minister Ramtane Lamamra called Istiqlal's statement “totally unacceptable and irresponsible” (al-Arabiya/AFP, October 30; North Africa Post, October 31). Morocco tried unsuccessfully to retake the provinces as part of its “Greater Morocco” strategy in 1963's “Sand War” with Algeria. The war did, however, see the introduction of massive defensive sand berms by Morocco, a tactic later successfully applied in Western Sahara to isolate the Polisario.

Morocco's King Muhammad VI declared that his nation would not be lectured to by “those who systematically trample on human rights.” Bouteflika's remarks also sparked a November 1 (Algeria's national day) demonstration outside the Algerian consulate in Casablanca in which a young Moroccan member of the Jeunesses Royalistes (Royal Youth) tore down the Algerian flag in the consulate compound. Though authorities charged the individual, Foreign Minister Lamamra protested that the detainee was treated as a hero in some quarters of Morocco and termed the incident an “insult” to Algeria (AFP, November 14; North Africa Post, November 11). Lamamra, a veteran diplomat, is considered an expert on the West Saharan issue and can be expected to take a hardline on the matter. Algeria's press called the incident a deliberate provocation and “an attack on the sovereignty of the country” (*Le Jeune Indépendant* [Algiers], November 2; *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, November 2). The Polisario Front jumped into the dispute as well, expressing its “outrage against this despicable act, which once again confirms the contempt of the Moroccan State

in respect of international law, values of brotherhood and good neighborliness and diplomatic practice” (*L’Expression* [Algiers], November 6).

In a speech given on November 6, the 38th anniversary of the “Green March” that claimed the Western Sahara for Morocco, King Muhammad VI accused Algeria of paying various human rights organizations to produce reports critical of Morocco’s administration in the Western Sahara. Other critics “unfairly and inimically believe anyone who claims that his rights were trampled or that he was tortured,” adding that all nations had the right to preserve their own security in the face of dangers. Referring to the Polisario specifically, the King said: “Anybody who takes issue with Morocco only has to go down to Tindouf and witness violations to the most basic of human rights...” (al-Monitor, November 8).

Bouteflika’s position on human rights monitoring in the Western Sahara was nearly identical to that advanced by the United States at the UN in April before angry reaction from Rabat and Paris convinced Washington to move more quietly on the issue. Rabat is extremely sensitive to accusations of human rights abuses in Western Sahara, going so far as to declare the UN Secretary General’s envoy to Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, *persona non grata* in Morocco after he made a statement on the issue last year.

The Western Sahara issue has prevented the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) from achieving anything of consequence, with its two largest members at permanent odds. There are very real costs associated with this disharmony: according to the African Economic Commission, a functioning Maghreb Union would result in a five percent growth of GDP in each of the five member nations, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania (al-Jazeera, July 31). Bachir Mustapha Essayd, a member of the Polisario’s National Secretariat, recently suggested that the 1975 Madrid Agreement and Morocco’s interpretation of it pose a significant obstacle in developing relationships between Maghreb region nations: “Morocco is the only [country] responsible for the instability in the region... These agreements stand as an obstacle to all Maghreb countries... Spain gave territory to Morocco that did not belong to it” (Sahara Press Service [al-Aaiun], November 14).

The border between Algeria and Morocco was closed in 1994 after Rabat accused Algeria’s secret services and the Islamist militant Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) of the bombing of a hotel in Marrakesh in which two Spaniards were killed. Algeria in turn accused Rabat of hosting the GIA and the border has been closed (except to an active smuggling trade)

ever since.

A Growing Security Threat?

Cooperation between Morocco and Algeria on security issues and other matters has reached low ebb. A mid-November conference of 17 regional foreign ministers hosted by Rabat and intended to strengthen border security in north and west Africa was forced to go ahead without the presence of an Algerian deputation, a crippling absence given that Algeria is the largest and most powerful nation in the region (Middle East Online, November 14). Regional security efforts mean little when the two strongest militaries in the region refuse to cooperate.

Malian foreign minister Tiéman Coulibaly claimed in March that the al-Qaeda-associated Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) was recruiting Sahrawi youths from the refugee camps as mercenaries (LeMag [Marrakesh], March 16). A Sahrawi was among those captured after the battle in northern Mali in which AQIM commander Abu Zeid was killed (*Le Figaro* [Paris], March 1). There are also reports that Sahrawis from the Polisario camps are participating in smuggling networks that cross the region, though it appears that the opportunity for young unemployed Sahrawis to make money is a greater factor than ideology in leading individuals to the criminal and terrorist networks operating in the Sahel-Sahara region. The camps remain a potential source of militants for AQIM and MUJWA, but at the present, young Sahrawi youth appear to be more interested in resuming a nationalist fight against Morocco than in joining the global jihad.

The kidnapping of three European aid workers from the Tindouf camp by AQIM operatives in October, 2011 appeared to be a sign that the North African jihad was beginning to encroach on the Sahrawi refugee camps, with Moroccan sources suggesting the abductions were carried out by Polisario itself in league with jihadists working under the late Amir Abu Zeid (Polisario-confidential.org, December 2, 2011; AFP, October 30, 2011). Pro-Moroccan sources said the kidnappings had confirmed “the active complicity between Polisario elements and AQIM,” though incriminating details were not forthcoming (Polisario-confidential.org, November 14, 2011). The hostages were eventually freed in Mali in July, 2012 after payment of a ransom.

Cooperation between the secular Polisario Front and the Islamist extremists of the type suggested by Morocco seems unlikely – as Polisario president Muhammad Abdelaziz notes, the Islamists don’t consider Polisario to be a Muslim

movement: “They will not forgive us for being a democratic movement. They will not forgive us for having equality for men and women” (PBS, October 25).

Conclusion

Growing resource development and the spread of Islamist militancy in the region are both capable of either intensifying the Western Sahara conflict or compelling a final settlement. The existing ceasefire has allowed the West, the UN and the African Union to assign a low priority to such a settlement, but changing conditions will demand action on this front. Renewed U.S. and French interest in resolving the problem is a promising development, but both parties will have to deal with the competing narratives offered by Morocco (an independent Western Sahara will represent a regional security threat) and the Polisario and their Algerian sponsors (Sahrawis have the right to self-determination as mandated by the United Nations). Should international indifference continue, the leaders of the Polisario Front will experience growing difficulty in keeping frustrated Sahrawi youth trapped in the camps of Tindouf from renewing the armed struggle and shattering the political solidarity and common purpose that is the cornerstone of the Polisario Front. Given that the resumption of such a conflict using guerrilla tactics would be largely futile against Moroccan defenses and overall military might, this would raise the possibility that asymmetric tactics such as bombings, assassinations and kidnappings could be introduced to press Morocco to accept a vote on self-determination. Though the Salafist-Jihadist ideology has yet to make significant inroads in the refugee camps, an assault on the Polisario political consensus would likely create new political/militant formations, some of which might be agreeable to accepting assistance from the Islamist militants operating in the region.

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