



IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS 1

THE ARMY OF JUSTICE AND THE THREAT OF SUNNI MILITANCY IN THE SISTAN-BALUCHISTAN PROVINCE OF IRAN
By Nima Adolkah 3

AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB ATTACKS MOROCCO'S "KINGDOM OF CORRUPTION AND DESPOTISM"
By Dario Cristiani 5

KURDISH STRATEGY TOWARDS ETHNICALLY-MIXED AREAS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT
By Wladimir van Wilgenburg 7



Muhajirin Brigade (Source EAWorldview)

SYRIA'S ARMY OF THE MUHAJIRIN PLEDGES ALLEGIANCE TO THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA

Andrew McGregor

On December 2, the Islamist Army of Muhajirin and Ansar in Bilad al-Sham issued a statement announcing it had declared its *baya'a* (oath of allegiance) to the Amir al-Muminin (commander of the faithful) Abu Bakr al-Husseini al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, leader of the al-Qaeda affiliated Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). [1] According to the document, the group's decision to place itself under ISIS command came after the Muhajirin ("emigrants") and ISIS had conducted a number of joint operations. The statement was signed by the "former Amir of the Army of the Muhajirin and Ansar, Omar al-Shishani" and the "former Shari'a judge of the Amir of the Muhajirin and Ansar, Abu Jafar al-Hattab."

The Muhajirin are dominated by fighters from the Northern Caucasus. They are led by Abu Omar, an ethnic Chechen from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, who has established a reputation for honesty as well as fighting skills due to his rejection of abuses against Syrian civilians by foreign fighters (see Eurasia Daily Monitor, August 9). Besides Chechens (estimated to form at least half of the Muhajirin), the group includes a reported large number of Dagestanis and ethnic Tatars and Bashkirs from the Middle Volga region (see Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 25). Components of the Ansar al-Muhajirin listed as giving their approval of the *baya'a* include the Arab mujahideen, the Turkish mujahideen, the mujahideen from the Caucasus, the European mujahideen, the heavy arms detachment, the commando detachment and the administrative council.

The statement appeared to be an elaboration of an earlier and much shorter announcement issued on November 21, in which the Muhajirin Brigade swore allegiance to the leader of ISIS, except for "those brothers from the Caucasus Emirate who had

Terrorism Monitor is a publication of The Jamestown Foundation. The Terrorism Monitor is designed to be read by policy-makers and other specialists yet be accessible to the general public. The opinions expressed within are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The Jamestown Foundation.

Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution of this or any Jamestown publication is strictly prohibited by law.



For comments or questions about our publications, please send an email to pubs@jamestown.org, or contact us at:

1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320
Washington, DC • 20036
Tel: (202) 483-8888
Fax: (202) 483-8337

Copyright ©2013

already sworn their oath to Emirate leader Dokku Umarov.” The announcement provided few other details besides citing several *hadith* (sayings or teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) supporting the idea that only members of the Quraysh tribe (as al-Baghdadi is alleged to be) are suitable for ruling the Caliphate (a notion disputed by many Islamic scholars who claim the *hadiths* refer only to conditions in the first era of Islam). [2]

According to the group’s media officer, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, the group believes that:

Secularism with its different banners and various schools like nationalism, communism and Ba’athism is an obvious *kufr* [disbelief] that contradicts Islam... The *kufr* of apostasy is greater by unanimity from the original *kufr*, and that is why fighting the apostates has more priority to us [than] fighting the original *kufr*... so our jihad is with the sword and spear and with argument and clarification, and who called for another religion than Islam or slandered the religion or fought us, then he is a combatant to us. [3]

Abu Hamza also referred to the apocalyptic predictions of Islamic eschatology that are set in *al-Shams* (the land of the Levant, including Syria) involving the arrival of the Mahdi (the expected one), the return of the Nabi Issa (Prophet Jesus) and their battle on the day of resurrection with al-Dajjal (“the false Messiah,” roughly in the role of the Anti-Christ of Christian eschatology):

Jihad will continue to the Day of Judgment. The development of events on the land of Sham will bring what no one expected because the land of Sham is guaranteed by Allah Almighty and the angels are spreading their wings over al-Sham. This is not Afghanistan or Bosnia or Chechnya, this is the land of al-Sham, Issa, peace be upon him, will come down here, and al-Dajjal will come out here, it is the land of epics and the land of resurrection... [4]

The Muhajirin recently completed “Operation Fatih” in the southwestern part of Aleppo governorate, claiming to have seized seven apartment towers and two villages as well as T-72 tanks and an anti-aircraft gun. The group claims that their victory brings them closer to the road connecting Aleppo with the south. [5]

Notes

1. “Statement of the Baya’a of the Army of Muhajirin and Ansar to the ISIS,” December 2, 2013, <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=47411>.

2. “Umar al-Shisani Swears an Oath to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” November 21, 2013, <http://fisyria.com/?p=1586>.

3. Islamic News Agency Haq: Muhajirin Battalion in a comprehensive interview: “Our goal is to liberate Syria from the Assad regime and establish the Islamic state,” April 14, 2013, <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=45493>.

4. *Ibid.*

5. “Operation Fatih,” <http://fisyria.com/?p=1630>.

AQAP COMMANDER SAYS “WAR ON TERRORISM” WILL RUIN U.S. ECONOMY

Andrew McGregor

Jihadi forums have begun posting a recent interview conducted with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) commander Nasr bin Ali al-A’ainisi by Yemen’s al-Wasat daily. In the course of the interview, al-A’ainisi explained why AQAP prefers armed rebellion to politics, saying that the movement rejected partisanship and democratic activities. When confronted by systems that oppose religious principles, it becomes impossible to form a political party because the imperative is to “remove this system” with all available means, “including jihad and forming an armed organization.” To turn to democracy and the political process would be a type of surrender: “Abandoning arms under a colonial crusader’s control and hegemony, means acceptance and subordination and bowing before those occupier, and leaving arms under the absence of Shari’a and ruling with what Allah have not revealed, means accepting this reality.” Furthermore, he defended armed struggle as ineffective, saying that the “War of Terror” had bankrupted the U.S. economy, claiming this as a victory for his movement.

The AQAP commander warned that a recent direction from al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri ordering jihadis to refrain from killing non-combatants “even if they are the families of those who fight us as much as possible” would have little effect on AQAP tactics and targets:

This is a clear phrase, and it came when speaking about dealing with the local governments and sects that live in the Islamic lands and it doesn’t require what you mentioned from stopping attacks against the American civilians, since the stance of the organization and the *fatwa* which it adopts is that the American people is a combatant people, while the speech is specific about non-combatants.

Commenting on the September 16 Washington Navy Yard attack by alleged Buddhist Aaron Alexis, al-A'ainisi noted that “the injustice and oppression of America is not only limited to the Muslims.” The commander went on to remind Americans that many nations had not forgotten their humiliations at the hands of the Americans, including Japan and Germany, and were only waiting for the appropriate time to take their revenge: “That’s why I give [Americans] glad tidings of a horrific dark future awaiting them, and the moment of revenge not only from the Muslims but rather from many enemies who cannot forget it even if the Americans forgot them.” Al-A'ainisi says it is important to remember that the American “war on terrorism” has cost five times what the United States spent on World War II, and that this was the principal cause of the forthcoming collapse of the American economy.

Al-A'ainisi rejects the notion that armed rebellion only invites external interference against Yemen: “If we refused any movement or action against the Arab and non-Arab tyrants under the pretext that it increases their tyranny or aggression, that means that we rule on ourselves to be slaves to them for life, for example: is it fair to say that the revolution of the Syrian people against the tyranny of Bashar only brought more foreign Russian-Iranian interference?... The question that should be asked: what have been achieved through submission, subordination and surrender to America for decades?”

AQAP was not invited to the national dialogue conference, according to al-A'ainisi, because the dialogue was sponsored by the United States and excluded the possibility of a Shari'a state. AQAP's demands are non-negotiable – the prevention of external influence in Yemen, particularly that of the United States and the West, and the implementation of Shari'a “in all the matters of the country.”

Note

1. Abdulrazaq al-Jammal, “Interview with AQAP commander Nasr bin Ali al-A'ainisi,” *al-Wasat*, Sana'a, November 13, 2013; posted on <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?p=173586>, November 28, 2013.

The Army of Justice and the Threat of Sunni Militancy in the Sistan-Baluchistan Province of Iran

Nima Adelhah

Fourteen border guards in the southeastern Iranian region of Saravan were assassinated and five seriously wounded on October 25 by a shadowy militant Sunni group known as Jaysh al-Adl (JA – Army of Justice) (IRNA, October 25; Mehr News, October 25). In retaliation, Iranian authorities hung 16 Baluchis (al-Akhbar, November 7). [1] A public prosecutor believed to have been involved in the execution of the Baluch insurgents was assassinated on November 6 and JA claimed responsibility, describing the killing as revenge against judicial authorities in a statement posted on the group's website (al-Jazeera, November 7; Shafaf News [Tehran], November 12). [2]

Fourteen border guards in the southeastern Iranian region of Saravan were assassinated and five seriously wounded on October 25 by a shadowy militant Sunni group known as Jaysh al-Adl (JA – Army of Justice) (IRNA, October 25; Mehr News, October 25). Two weeks later, following the mass JA claimed responsibility for the assassination of a Zabol-based prosecutor believed to have been involved in the mass execution of Baluch insurgents as retaliation for the October 25 attack on the border guards (al-Jazeera, November 7; Shafaf News [Tehran], November 12).

The latest series of attacks by JA have not been isolated incidents. The armed Sunni group has carried out several military operations against the Iranian forces since 2012. The latest was on December 5, when four members of JA were killed by Iranian security guards in a series of skirmishes along the border between Iran and Pakistan (JamNews [Tehran], December 5). The militant group warns of future attacks against Iranian officials, while the Iranian state calls for a firmer response to such attacks.

JA describes itself as a “political-military” movement of the “Ahle Sunnat-e Iran” (Sunnis of Iran), with the aspiration of freeing the Baluch people from the hegemony of the Iranian government. The leader of the group, Abdul Rahim Mollahzadeh (a.k.a. Salah al-din Farogi), comes from Rasak, a southeastern border town in the impoverished Sarbaz County whose local population has close cultural connections with the Pakistani region of Baluchistan (Shafaf, November 12).

The movement maintains that it is a clandestine group that focuses on attacking military bases and deliberately avoids harming civilians in order to uphold a just war against the “Safavi” regime in Iran. The reference is to the Safavid Empire, which established Shia Islam as the state religion in

sixteenth-century Iran.

The origin of the JA goes back to 2012, when the organization first emerged as an offshoot of Jundallah (Soldiers of God), a Sunni militant organization of Baluch ethnic background founded by Abdolmalek Rigi, who was executed by the Islamic Republic in 2010 (al-Arabiya, October 29; JameJam News, October 29; Shafaf, November 12). While Jundallah disintegrated with the death of Rigi, JA emerged as a new Baluch militant movement with strong sectarian ideological overtones. Unlike Jundallah, whose primary demand was that Tehran improve the lives of Iranian Sunnis, JA appears to be more of a separatist movement, demanding that the Iranian regime leave the Sistan-Baluchistan province.

In terms of organization, JA appears to be a tightly knit group of Sunni Baluch fighters who may have both rural and urban support in the Iranian and Pakistani border region. The group is based in three military camps near the Iranian-Pakistani border (JamNews December 2013). In operational terms, the group engages in activities such as the use of explosives against Iranian border guards, hostage-taking operations and assassination attacks against high-ranking government officials in the province.

The group has employed social media as a way to propagate its ideology and to express demands on the Iranian state. Videos and clips of military operations are posted online sporadically, often days or weeks after a military conflict between the organization and the Iranian military forces took place. JA leader Salah al-din Farogi and other commanders post anti-government statements on Facebook and YouTube, speaking of the oppressive nature of the Iranian regime and its efforts to marginalize Baluch, Arab and Kurdish populations. The videotaped confessions of prisoners purported to be Iranian intelligence officers are also posted on the group's Facebook and blog sites.

According to the Iranian state, JA is a foreign-backed militia that is modeled after the militant-political organization Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq-e Iran (People's Mujahideen of Iran), a dissident-militant group known for its terrorist operations before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Mashreq News, October 27). Tehran accuses JA of taking support from Israel and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, which seek to destabilize the unity of Islamic Iran (ShiaNews, November 18).

In reality, JA is a political-military movement that reflects a recent wave of radicalization among the younger Baluch population. The trend towards militancy and sectarianism is largely due to a combination of domestic and regional grievances. Such grievances play an integral part in shaping the conditions upon which the JA has risen to challenge the Iranian state, though its success in legitimizing its operations among the local population remains unknown.

Sistan-Baluchistan is the most poverty-stricken region in Iran. The province has considerable infrastructural, educational and economic problems that are primarily caused by the unequal distribution of wealth. The decline of the Iranian economy, the fall of the national currency, the subsequent rise of inflation and increasing unemployment have contributed to growing poverty in the province.

Since the mid-2000s, the Islamic Republic has seen an upsurge in Sunni separatist militancy, partly in response to the economic conditions of the Sunni-majority province. Groups such as Harakat Ansar Iran (HAI) have increasingly adopted sectarian agendas in their militant operations against the Iranian state. Their anti-Shia outlook reflects the views of a Salafi militant movement that sees Shia Iran as responsible for the Muslim predicament, especially in Syria, where sectarian conflict has led to a bloody civil war and a proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. [3]

Sistan-Baluchistan borders Afghanistan and Pakistan, two countries that also face instability due to drug-trafficking and secessionist insurgency movements. In February 2013, Iran signed a security agreement with Pakistan to prevent the flow of organized crime and militant forces into its territories (Press TV [Tehran], November 5). However, the borders remain porous, allowing a flow of insurgents and drug smugglers in and out of the country.

The insecure borderland has seen a sharp rise in sectarian tensions since the dawn of the Syrian civil war in 2011, possibly exacerbated by a Saudi Arabian push to spread radical Sunnism as a counter-balance to Iran's involvement in Syria. JA has repeatedly described its "revenge operations" in terms of retaliating against Iranian military involvement in Syria. For the Sunni Iranian militant group, their conflict with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and representatives of the Islamic Republic is one between "justice" and shirk (idolatry or polytheism), a major act of transgression in Islam that is often associated with Shiism by Sunni Salafists.

The regional dimension underlines the interplay between sectarianism and the regional proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The sectarian dimension in particular is the most problematic aspect of the security breakdown in southeastern Iran. The security crisis derives not only from the failure of the Iranian state to improve the life of the poverty-stricken province in terms of expanding economic projects to better the daily lives of the population, but also from the proliferation of separatist movements with sectarian agendas in neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the years to come, the border regions between these three countries could enter a new era of possible ethnic-sectarian conflict with global security implications.

Nima Adalkah is an independent analyst based in New York. His current research agenda includes the Middle East, military strategy and technology, and nuclear proliferation among

other defense and security issues.

Notes

1. Casualty reports are inconsistent. The semi-official site, Fars News, stated that 17 guards were killed and four were taken hostage (Fars News, October 26).
2. See http://jaishuladl.blogspot.ca/2013/10/blog-post_26.html.
3. See the Arabic and Persian political statement by the group on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=125416294205692&story_fbid=490457414368243.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Attacks Morocco's "Kingdom of Corruption and Despotism"

Dario Cristiani

Al-Andalus, the media branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), released a rather sophisticated and detailed video on Morocco titled "Le royaume de la corruption et du despotisme" (The kingdom of corruption and despotism) on September 12. [1] The video mixed a series of elements, from Wikileaks cables to TV reports, to present a harsh set of accusations against Moroccan King Muhammad VI (Lakome [Rabat], September 14, 2013; Afriquinfos [Barcelona], September 16). Communications Minister and government spokesman Mustapha al-Khalfi said that the AQIM broadcasting was an "attempt to undermine the Moroccan model" (Maroc.Ma, September 18).

Morocco has been targeted by major terrorist attacks in the past, the most recent being an April 2011 attack in Marrakesh, in which a remote controlled bomb detonated in Jamaa al-Fna square, killing 17 people and injuring 20 more. AQIM denied its involvement in this operation, saying that it was likely carried out by local Moroccan militants with experience in other theaters (*Le Figaro*, May 7, 2011; *Jeune Afrique*, May 6, 2011). The two individuals ultimately charged with carrying out the attacks, Adil Athmani and Hakim Dah, were later condemned to death (*La Nouvelle Tribune*, March 3, 2012).

Morocco's Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain (GICM - Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group) was a Sunni Islamist terrorist organization affiliated with al-Qaeda. Its alleged leader, Sa'ad Houssaini, was arrested in 2007 on charges of involvement in the May 2003 attacks that killed

45 people in Casablanca (*Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, March 9, 2007). The investigations of these attacks revealed that the organizational link with al-Qaeda central was rather loose, though the group was likely inspired by al-Qaeda. However, the group's capacity to operate in Morocco remained limited and the group lost its operational capacity after the 2003 government crackdown. Locally, it has been suggested that this group was never a fully organized movement, but more of a label, used by Moroccan security services to describe a loose network of independent militants operating outside and within the country.

Given this history, the AQIM video is particularly notable – it represents AQIM's first real and open threat against the kingdom (*Le Monde*, September 18). However, the rationale behind this video likely stretches beyond the specific idea of targeting Morocco in the future. It is more likely that AQIM, which is undergoing a major process of reorganization following the French-led intervention in Mali, wants to send a signal to potential militants in Morocco. This is an attempt to push them to join their ranks and direct their rage against the system (embodied by the king) in an AQIM-guided jihad (*L'Observateur du Maroc*, February 11; see also Terrorism Monitor Brief, October 18).

In historical terms, the concept of "Grand Maroc," promoted especially by nationalist circles linked to the Istiqlal Party, was central in the formulation of Moroccan foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of independence. According to this concept, the country's natural and historical territory includes Mauritania, the western part of northern Mali (including Timbuktu), the Western Sahara and a sizeable part of southern Algeria. Mauritania, especially, has been the target of a series of political, legal and diplomatic strategies implemented by Morocco to extend its sovereignty over it. However, the end of Spanish rule over the Western Sahara in 1975 changed the priorities of Rabat, which helped the two countries improve their bilateral relations, since Morocco understood that improving relations with Mauritania was helpful in maintaining its control over the Western Sahara. Moreover, as the focus of Moroccan foreign policy shifted more clearly toward the Mediterranean (EC/EU) and Atlantic (USA) dimension, Morocco recognized the cost of being perceived as an expansionist nation in the Arab and African world and irredentist claims progressively lost their central place in Morocco's foreign policy discourse.

An unforeseen result of this change was that Morocco's lack of a Saharan/Sahelian geopolitical depth has become a security asset for Morocco, helping the country to avoid the direst consequences of the regional destabilization of the past three years. Morocco has been able to contain the

revolutionary wave that hit other regional countries in 2011's Arab Spring. Muhammad VI, aware that granting some reforms would help ease political tensions, decided to make some constitutional changes. However, some of these changes were more cosmetic than effective, as the presence of a shadow cabinet of counselors appointed directly by the King reduced the space for maneuver of the forces that emerged from the elections dominant, especially the Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP). Moreover, the presence of a strong pro-royal sentiment in Morocco also played a role in reducing the spillover effects of both the Arab Spring and the subsequent destabilization of the Sahel.

From this point of view, while AQIM threats are real, the capacity of the organization to operate in Morocco remains limited. AQIM is in a process of internal and operational reorganization following the disruption of its networks in Northern Mali. While local cells of jihadists tied to al-Qaeda exist in Morocco and infiltration from neighboring countries remains possible given the porous nature of regional borders, their presence cannot be compared to that of groups in other Maghreb countries such as Algeria, Libya and Tunisia.

The threat to Morocco from Sahelian terrorist groups is primarily a governance challenge. The geographical proximity of Europe makes Morocco a major terminal for the drug trafficking smuggling South America via West Africa to Europe that runs across the 10th parallel north (a.k.a. "Highway 10"). This traffic is augmented by the flourishing cultivation of hashish in Morocco, which remains a major problem despite the efforts of authorities to fight it. Finally, while the presence of Saharawi fighters in the ranks of AQIM and other regional terrorist organizations is a reality, Moroccan authorities and media have largely overestimated this presence, which is not by any means as structured and dangerous as Rabat presents it. The Western Sahara issue remains at the core of Moroccan national interests (see *Terrorism Monitor*, December 2). This centrality explains why Morocco tries to exploit the presence of Saharawi militants in these groups to strengthen the support of external countries for its territorial claims, in a similar fashion to what other regional countries have done, and do, to buy the support of many Western capitals. Despite the presence of significant historical and political links between Morocco and the Sahelian space, this space now occupies only a residual importance in the geopolitical vision of the country. Morocco continues to be largely focused on its Maghrebi, Mediterranean and Atlantic dimensions.

The recent tensions between Morocco and Algeria and the persistence of a zero-sum view of their relationship continue to prevent Rabat and Algiers from greater cooperation in the

fight against regional terrorism. For Morocco, the Sahel is a source of potential threat, but it is also a space in which to reduce the capacity of its major regional rival to enjoy a greater freedom of action in the wider North African context.

In terms of threat assessment, the terrorist threat against Morocco is real, but it cannot be compared to that faced by other countries in the region. Morocco has its own local jihadists. In August, the government announced that it had dismantled a cell connected to AQIM operatives in the cities of Fez, Meknes, Taounate and Tiznit (*The Daily Star* [Beirut], August 16). The flow of drugs and illegal goods that pass through Moroccan territory represents a significant reminder of how porous the Moroccan borders remain, despite the fact that Morocco is one of the most effective sovereign countries, in the region in particular and in Africa in general.

AQIM is undergoing a major process of internal change following years of crackdowns in Algeria, the progressive Sahelization of its geographical focus and the hybridization of its activities, divided between pure jihad and mafia-style criminal activities. The recent video is likely part of a wider AQIM strategy to re-acquire its regional operational depth. For Morocco, regional terrorist groups represent more of a governance challenge, given their role in illegal trafficking, than a direct security threat. However, there is a risk that small cells, either inspired by al-Qaeda or with organizational ties to AQIM, may begin operations in Morocco.

Dario Cristiani is a PhD Candidate in Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London. Previously, he has been a teaching fellow in Political Science and Comparative Politics at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and a political analyst with the Power and Interest News Report (PINR).

Note

1. See: https://twitter.com/Andalus_Media.

Kurdish Strategy Towards Ethnically-Mixed Areas in the Syrian Conflict

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Kurdish fighters in Syria have taken greater control of areas inhabited by both Arabs and Kurds since July 16, and aim to capture three other mixed areas in the governorates of Raqqah, Aleppo and Hasakah in order to connect existing Kurdish areas (al-Monitor, October 25). This might cause opposition by Arab tribes that the Syrian regime placed in the Kurdish-dominated areas in the governorate of Hasakah in the 1970's as part of an Arabization plan to change the region's demographic balance at the expense of the Kurds (al-Monitor, October 8). However, the Kurdish parties have made efforts to win the support of local Arab populations by distinguishing between jihadist and Arab civilians, and by attempting to involve the latter in Kurdish interim governance.

Although the Kurds have taken part in a mixed Arab-Kurdish brigade within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) called Jabhat al-Akrad (Kurdish Front) since mid-2012, the Kurdish militia, the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG - People's Defense Units) is now cooperating with Arab tribes to control these mixed areas. The strongest Syrian Kurdish party, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD – Democratic Union Party), is carrying out a “soft-policy” in dealings with the local Arab population. This is based on the ideology of the rebel Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK – Kurdistan Workers Party), created in Turkey in 1978.

Background

The PYD, affiliated with the PKK, announced in July that it would form a transitional government based on the democratic self-management project outlined at the third party conference of the PYD in 2007. The project is based on the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan's “confederalism” or “democratic autonomy,” which aims to form self-ruled Kurdish areas in Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey, without threatening the territorial integrity of these states (al-Monitor, November 13).

Unlike the more homogenous Kurdish areas of Iraq and Turkey, the Kurdish areas in Syria do not constitute a contiguous Kurdish region, making the development of Kurdish autonomy in Syria more difficult. The Kurds in Syria are spread between three unconnected Kurdish enclaves (Afrin, Ayn al-Arab and al-Jazeera), located in the

governorates of Aleppo and Hasakah, which are surrounded by Arab and Turkmen-inhabited areas. There are also Christians living in these areas.

Interim Administration Project

The PYD has recognized this geographical reality; therefore, on November 11 they announced the division of the Kurdish areas into three cantons, with each canton having its own council to administer local affairs. PYD-leader Salih Muslim hopes that “the three of them will be united at a later stage when circumstances allow them to do so” (KurdishInfo.com, December 7).

The YPG militia was formed to control the Kurdish-dominated areas of Syria. The YPG confirmed in November that they want to connect these Kurdish areas by capturing the areas of Tel Ebyad, Azaz and Jarabulus, inhabited by Turkmen and Arabs and mostly controlled by Islamist groups close to al-Qaeda.

Most likely, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) took precautionary measures against this by arresting Kurdish civilians suspected of sympathy towards the PYD. Reportedly, hundreds of members of the ISIS arrived in the Kurdish neighborhoods of Manbej in the Jarabulus region on December 2, followed by the kidnapping of 51 Kurdish civilians in three days and the imposition of a blockade on Afrin and Kobani (Hawar News Agency, December 6; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 5; Welati, December 7).

A pro-ISIS Twitter account claimed that the ISIS raided YPG sleeper cells and arrested more than “50 apostates” (@zhoof21, December 6). Moreover, Islamist groups have been bringing Arabs from other areas to Tel Ebyad and putting them in Kurdish houses to increase their support (Firat News Agency, August 25).

The ISIS and other Islamist armed opposition groups had earlier forced the Kurdish FSA group Jabhat al-Akrad (close to the PYD and PKK) out of the mixed areas in the north of Syria – al-Bab, Azzaz, Raqqah, Tel Ebyad, the countryside of Aleppo and other areas – after the YPG expelled the ISIS and other Islamist groups from the mixed city of Ras al-Ayn on July 17. Jabhat al-Akrad was also expelled from the FSA's Military Council in August (Transnational Middle-East Observer, August 15).

Jabhat al-Akrad was most likely created by the PYD to gain access to mixed Arab-Kurdish areas and to make logistics between the three Kurdish enclaves easier. “Kurds in Syria

live in various Arab cities, towns and villages. We wanted Kurds to have a common organization in these regions with other ethnicities. Therefore, we established Jabhat al Akrad,” said Haji Ahmad Kurdi, head of Jabhat al-Akrad (Rudaw, August 11).

A New Strategy Toward the Arab Population

However, since the YPG took over Ras al-Ayn and Jabhat al-Akrad was expelled from most mixed areas, the PYD and YPG have changed their strategy. On October 24, the YPG captured the Iraqi Yaroubiya border crossing with the support of local Arab tribes (al-Monitor, November 25). Some Arab villages supported the YPG in expelling FSA and Islamist fighters in villages surrounding Ras al-Ayn as a result of looting by armed opposition groups (al-Monitor, October 8).

However, Arab fighters could still switch their support to Islamist armed groups if the Kurdish groups grow too powerful and threaten to dominate Arab-inhabited areas in the north. Four leading members of the Arab Ba’ath party joined jihadist groups in Arab villages in al-Qahtaniyah (Tirbesipi) fighting the YPG even though the Ba’ath-regime opposes Jihadi groups (Hawar News Agency, October 13). The city experienced tensions between Arab settlers and Kurds after 2011 and is part of the Arab belt.

The PYD therefore maintains a careful policy towards the mixed areas and tries to incorporate Arabs and Christians in their interim administration. This is also part of the imprisoned PKK leader’s ideology of democratic confederalism, which opposes a centralist nation-state and aims to preserve internal autonomy.

Öcalan’s system of confederalism aims for “political self-administration where all groups of society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils,” Öcalan wrote in his ideology of democratic confederalism, released on March 20, 2005. [1]

Sinem Muhammad, co-head of the PYD People’s Council for West Kurdistan, said that the PYD rejects borders and called for the recognition of ethnic differences between Arabs and Kurds. She said that in mixed areas, Arabs have the right to have their own council and participate in the administration with their own councils. [2]

The ideology of the PYD and PKK seems to have had some success in the Arab village of Alook, close to Ras al-Ayn, where local Arabs thanked the YPG (al-Monitor, October 13). A local council of Arabs was formed in the village with

the help of the PYD, and the YPG stayed out of the village to demonstrate that they do not want to change the local demography.

The YPG also got some support from members of the Shammar tribe when they took over the Yaroubiya border crossing on October 24. The Shammar tribe’s FSA brigade, the Liwa Ahrar al-Jazira (LAJ), was expelled from Yaroubiya in mid-October following allegations of corruption by the al-Qaeda affiliate Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). [3] The YPG used the local resentment against al-Qaeda to dominate the town.

There are signs that the YPG is now trying to incorporate Arabs in their armed formations. On November 1, the YPG created an Arab brigade in Ras al-Ayn called Ahrar al-Watan (Free Men of the Homeland), led by Hawas al-Akub (Hawar News Agency, November 1). Also in Yaroubiya, local Arabs joined YPG security formations and local Arabs and Kurds will reportedly jointly administer the border-crossing (al-Monitor, November 25).

PYD leader Salih Muslim outlined a clearer Arab policy in a recent interview, saying that the PYD’s militias would fight against jihadi groups, but would not force out local Arabs, whether settlers or native Arabs:

There are three sorts of Arabs among us: there are those with whom we have always lived and who we have fought alongside. We defend the brotherhood between these peoples. There are those who do not belong, Arabs who came from outside, other countries or the region, the jihadists who have burned our homes, and decapitated Kurds. Finally, there are the Arabs who were moved to Kurdistan by force by [former Syrian President] Hafez al-Assad ... to Arabize the region. They are victims ... and we advocate a peaceful solution for these populations. Those who can return to their hometowns should do so and the others can live in peace with the Kurds (AFP December 2).

Conclusion

It seems that the most powerful Kurdish party, the PKK-affiliated PYD, has decided to expand their control over mixed areas in Northern Syria instead of cooperating with the FSA. Their aim is to create a transitional administration. In mixed areas under their control, the PYD also wants to create councils of the local population based on the ideology of imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan and has a ‘soft policy’ that gives local Arabs their own local power. The PYD aims to include local Arabs and Christians in their administration

project and their militias, or to cooperate with independent Arab or Christian militias. In the end, the success of their project will depend on whether the civil war continues, or one of the opposing factions wins. If either faction wins, they would be unlikely to accept any form of Kurdish autonomy. The PYD hopes to get international support in the upcoming Geneva II conference scheduled for January in order to legitimize their project. The PYD emphasizes that their project is temporary, although in reality they want to create a form of Kurdish self-rule in Syria.

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a political analyst specializing in issues concerning Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey with a particular focus on Kurdish politics.

Notes

1. Abdullah Ocalan, Democratic Confederalism, International Initiative Edition, 2011, <http://www.freedom-for-ocalan.com/english/download/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf>.
2. International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle," Middle East Report N°136, January 22, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/136-syrias-kurds-a-struggle-within-a-struggle.aspx>.
3. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi and Fadel al-Kifa'ee: "The Fall of Yaroubiya to the YPG in Context," November 5, 2013, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.ca/search?updated-max=2013-11-06T15:44:00-08:00&max-results=7&start=7&by-date=false>.