



# Terrorism Monitor

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Nuer and Dinka White Army

## SOUTH SUDAN’S TRIBAL “WHITE ARMY” – PART TWO: ARMS AND THE OVERTHROW OF TRADITIONAL ORDER

Andrew McGregor

An unprecedented cattle raid by members of South Sudan’s Murle tribe on the Nuer “holy city” of Wec Deang on January 14, 2012 yielded some 4,000 cattle (with some 15 civilians killed by the raiders), but invited sure retaliation from the Nuer White Army. Wec Deang is without doubt the single most important historical and spiritual site in Nuerland as the burial place of the Prophet Ngundeng and the location of the Bie Dengkur, a massive sacred mound erected in the 1870s by thousands of Nuer under Ngundeng’s direction. The mound was partially destroyed by the British in the 1920s as a symbol of Nuer resistance but was left untouched by an unspoken agreement between all sides in the Second Sudanese Civil War.

Reports that the Murle had attacked the mound itself during the January raid led Ngundeng’s grandson, Gai Lel Ngundeng, to issue a religious decree “ordering all Nuer in the world to fight [the] Murle tribe.” [1] A White Army statement said that “The Nuer youth were enraged after hearing [of] the attack on Wec Deang because it is an affront to all Nuer, including Nuer of Ethiopia, that the place of Ngundeng’s pyramid could be attacked by Murle. [White Army military leader] Bor Doang concluded that Murle deserters of the SPLA who did that must pay a price for insulting Prophet Ngundeng.” [2] Prior to the launch of the “Savannah Storm” operation against the Murle, Nuer White Army leaders travelled to Wec Deang to ritually slaughter bulls and receive blessings from Gai Lel Ngundeng. [3] Murle raiders also rely on the blessing of a local *alaan ci meeri*, or Red Chief, a religious figure who is believed to be in direct contact with the spirits.

The emergence of the White Army occurred simultaneously with an influx of small

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arms into eastern Upper Nile Province in the early 1990s and the 1991 split in the rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). This left largely Nuer pro-Khartoum forces under Riek Machar (the SPLA Nasir-faction), fighting a civil war within a civil war with the largely Dinka-led SPLA-Torit faction under the late Colonel John Garang. While Machar's main military support came from SPLA deserters and other pro-Khartoum tribal militias that feared Dinka domination of the South Sudan or preferred Southern separation to Garang's vision of a "New Sudan," the loosely organized White Army was raised from the Nuer cattle camps and was never absorbed into the formal hierarchy of any of these groups despite efforts to bring them under one command or another. Part of the problem was that there was no formal or even stable, leadership to co-opt. Membership in the White Army was informal and based on availability, civilian status and possession of a modern firearm. [4]

It is likely that most of the arms that made their way into the hands of the White Army and other pro-Khartoum militias originated with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). Possession of weapons allowed Nuer youth to disregard and undermine the authority of traditional community leaders. The militia was formed on an ad hoc basis, usually in response to some real or perceived threat to the Nuer community, though many members clearly saw membership in the White Army as a means of acquiring arms, cattle and wives. White Army columns typically coordinate their movements through the bush using Thuraya satellite telephones. These rapidly mobilized groups, consisting largely of Lou Nuer, are usually armed with a mixture of machetes, clubs and Kalashnikov assault rifles.

The absorption of pro-Khartoum militias into the SPLA followed the 2006 Juba declaration and the SPLA's simultaneous disarmament campaigns and appeared to put an end to the White Army, at least temporarily. In many places, the disarmament campaign was supported by Nuer civilians who had tired of the arrogance and violence of Nuer youth affiliated with the White Army. Many elements of the militia were not prepared to disband, however, and ignored Riek Machar's orders to do so before being destroyed by the professional soldiers of the SPLA in 2006. [5]

The White Army is now believed to be operating in sympathy with Riek Machar. A 2012 statement from the militia acknowledged Riek Machar as the founder of the militia in 1992; however, the statement also asserted that "we do not recognize Riek Machar as a Nuer leader. He is responsible for all the killings we experience today, because it was he who armed [the] Murle tribe in 1997 when he signed [the] Khartoum Peace Agreement with Omar Bashir." The

statement, signed by military leader Bol Koang, went on to provide a succinct summary of the militia's purpose: "We want to state, in no uncertain terms, that the Nuer White Army has no political objective. The primary objective of the White Army is to defend the Nuer livelihood from Murle who carried out attacks against the Nuer civilians."

Tut Deang, a White Army spokesman, has explained that the militia is a youth organization that rejects the leadership of traditional chiefs (Sudan Tribune, January 6, 2011). However, the influence of traditional Nuer "prophets" (sometimes styled as "magicians") remains an important factor in the direction taken by Nuer militias, and their blessing is vital before undertaking a campaign. The White Army was revitalized in 2011, when a Nuer prophet named Dak Kueth claimed to have been possessed by spiritual powers. He began recruiting thousands of Nuer youth under the military command of Bor Doang to repress the Murle, who were engaged in local cattle raids and abductions of children (Sudan Tribune, May 31, 2013). Dak Kueth urged Nuer youth to refuse to participate in the government's disarmament campaign before he escaped the SPLA by fleeing to Nuer communities in neighboring Ethiopia.

Despite the White Army's apparent focus on combating the Murle, a late December statement allegedly issued by the militia stated that the White Army was now attempting to form an alliance with the Murle against the Dinka leadership in Juba, a development that reflects the growing political instability of South Sudan:

The problem of Nuer and Murle is now Dinka leadership in Bor and Juba. The Nuer and Murle have a common interest, that is, removal of Dinka government is the only solution to end cattle rustling which was introduced by Dinka... We therefore warn the UN that it is possible for genocide to take place in the coming weeks when we attack Bor town... The solution is for Murle and Nuer to unite to confront the Dinka who have an agenda against both the Nuer and Murle. From today onwards, the Nuer White Army will not fight Murle anymore. The focus is now to topple the Dinka government in Juba. [6]

#### Notes

1. Gai L. Ngundeng, "The Grandson of Prophet Ngundeng Criticizes Attack on the 'Holy City,' Calls upon Nuer to Fight Murle and SPLA Defectors," Decree No: 001/1/12, <http://www.southsudannewsagency.com/news/press-releases/the-grandson-of-prophet-ngundeng-criticizes-attack-on-the-holy-city-calls-upon-nuer-to-fight-murle-and-spla-defectors>. For Nuer prophets, see: Douglas H. Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*:

*A History of Prophecy from the Upper Nile in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997. For the Murle, see: Bazett A. Lewis, *The Murle: Red Chiefs and Black Commoners*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972.

2. “Nuer and Dinka White Army to Launch ‘Operation Savannah Storm’ against Murle Armed Youth,” Leadership of the Nuer and Dinka White Army Media Release, Uror County, Jonglei State, South Sudan, February 4, 2012, <http://www.southsudannewsagency.com/news/press-releases/nuer-and-dinka-white-army-to-launch-operation-savannah-storm-against-murle-armed-youth>.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Arild Skedsmo, Kwong Danhier and Hoth Gor Luak, “The Changing Meaning of Small Arms in Nuer Society,” *African Security Review* 12(4), 2003, pp. 57-67.

5. John Young, *The White Army: An Introduction and Overview*, Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, June 2007, <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-05-White-Army.pdf>.

6. “Both the Murle and Nuer White armies will work together to remove the Dinka regime,” December 27, 2013, <http://ethiopianewsforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=68952>.

## POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND ISLAMIST MILITANCY BECOME ENTWINED IN MAIDUGURI BOMBING

*Andrew McGregor*

After four years of counter-terrorist operations and a state of emergency in Nigeria’s three northeastern provinces since last May, Nigeria’s security forces appear to have made little progress in restoring security, though their efforts may be complicated by the ruthless political style of northern Nigeria as the nation approaches general elections in 2015.

The deeper roots of political violence in northern Nigeria (of which Boko Haram is only a symptom) were well displayed in the January 14 suicide bombing in Mogadishu that killed 43 people (*Daily Times Nigeria*, January 15). The explosion occurred close to a JTF military post at mid-day on the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, when the city center was certain to be filled with people (Salafists reject observance of the *mawlid*, the Prophet’s birthday).

Soon after the blast, hundreds of youths wearing shirts and hats bearing the insignia of the All Progressives Congress (APC – a 2013 alliance of Nigeria’s four main opposition

parties) armed with clubs and machetes began targeting vehicles believed to belong to supporters of the former state governor, Ali Modu Sheriff, and the current state deputy governor, Zannah Mustapha, both APC members (the vehicles were identified by the widespread use of political party stickers). The rioters were on their way to the homes of Sheriff and Mustapha when they were intercepted by security forces. Sheriff was in the city for the first time in 11 months and left shortly after the blast. Other APC-clad youth actually tried to attack the local APC office while chanting: “We are going see the end of Ali Sheriff and his accomplice, Zannah Mustapha, who have brought this calamity to us. They are behind this bomb explosion” (*Premium Times* [Abuja], January 15). Sheriff helped the current governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, into office in 2011, but the two APC members are now engaged in a bitter rivalry, with Sheriff indicating that he plans to campaign to take the office back in 2015.

There were reports that many of the rioting youth were actually members of the “Civilian JTF,” a local anti-Boko Haram vigilante group that also appears to be available for hire in regional political disputes (*Daily Post* [Lagos], January 12; Sahara Reporters [Lagos], January 14).

The Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states of northeast Nigeria have been under a state of emergency since last May. The Borno state capital has not been targeted by bombings since the multi-service Joint Task Force (JTF) and other security forces established a security regime in the city last May. There was no claim of responsibility for the latest Maiduguri bombing, though the military blamed Boko Haram (PM News [Lagos], January 14). The bombing was the first in Maiduguri proper since the city’s market was attacked in March 2013.

A statement issued a day after the blast in the name of Sheriff’s campaign manager, Bako Bunu, claimed that the Maiduguri bombing was actually the work of “evil state government officials in Borno who are doing this in the name of scoring cheap and irresponsible political goals,” referring to Sheriff’s political opponents within the APC (*Premium Times* [Lagos], January 15). However, a week later Kolo said he was surprised to see his name on the statement, claiming he had been away in Chad and heard nothing of the matter until his return, while adding that he had denied making the statement without any external coercion (*Premium Times* [Lagos], January 21).

Borno State governor, Alhaji Kashim Shettima, was pelted with stones in Maiduguri in January 11 after word spread that he had intended to humiliate Sherrif by hiring “Civilian

JTF” vigilantes, various thugs and elements of the security services to prevent Sherrif’s arrival in the city. Sherrif revised his plans and arrived to a chorus of supporters chanting “The Leader is back, the leader is back, we don’t want Kashim Shettima’s style of leadership” (*Daily Post* [Lagos], January 12).

Four days after the Maiduguri blast, Boko Haram members attacked Banki, a town along the Cameroon border. The militants attacked the police station with RPGs first, driving away police before starting to go door-to-door slitting the throats of residents (*Osun Defender*, January 18). Two nights later, the Islamists struck Alau Ngawo village in northeastern Borno State, burning houses and killing 18 people in a two-hour rampage before security forces arrived (Reuters, January 20).

Boko Haram was blamed for a January 8 attack on a mosque in the Kano State village of Kwankwaso, about 20 miles from Kano city. However, there were indications the attack was actually politically motivated by opponents of the state governor, Rabi’u Musa Kwankwaso, who hails from the village and defected to the opposition only a month before the attack (Reuters, January 8).

Boko Haram has shown little respect for Nigeria’s armed services, repeatedly attacking military installations rather than avoiding them. Hundreds of fighters stormed Maiduguri’s international airport and air-base on December 2, 2013, damaging two helicopters and three decommissioned military aircraft (al-Jazeera, January 14). It later developed that the attackers had badly damaged equipment belonging to the civil Nigerian Airspace Management Agency, forcing the cancellation of all civilian flights into the airport until next March (*Osun Defender*, December 31, 2013). Attacks on military targets in the last few months have allowed Boko Haram to build a considerable arsenal.

Residents of the three states under emergency rule have consistently complained of a casual attitude toward collateral damage and civilian casualties amongst the security forces deployed there. The issue came to national attention on January 12, when a Nigerian jet fighter mistakenly targeted a convoy carrying Senator Muhammad Ali Ndume in the Gworza area of Borno state. Though the convoy was escorted by marked army and police vehicles, the pilot dropped four bombs, all of which landed on the nearby village of Pulka. The attack highlighted the Nigerian Air Force’s tendency to mount bombing runs without coordination with ground forces (*Premium Times* [Lagos], January 13).

With criticism of the military effort in the northeast

spreading two days after the Maiduguri blast, President Goodluck Jonathan sacked Nigeria’s military leadership, appointing an air force officer from the northeast (Adamawa State), Air Marshal Alex Badeh, as the new chief-of-defense-staff. Brimming with confidence, Badeh has promised to finish counter-insurgency operations in the northeast by the time the state of emergency expires in April: “I can only say that this thing is already won” (AFP, January 20).

In the current climate, political violence can be expected to increase over the next year in northern Nigeria, with attackers needing to do little more than yell “Allahu Akhbar” to have the incidents blamed on Boko Haram. At the same time, Boko Haram remains very active in the rural areas, particularly along the borders of the northeastern states. Cross-border security cooperation, especially with Cameroon, remains poor. Improved security in the urban areas of the region has inadvertently left the unemployed youth of the vigilante groups with little to do, creating a useful pool of recruits for political thuggery in the run-up to the 2015 elections.

## Al-Qaeda Leader al-Zawahiri Urges Jihad Against the “Anti-Islamic” Government of Bangladesh

*Animesh Roul*

Widespread violence, marked by protest rallies, *hartals* (general shutdowns), group clashes and bombings have led to massive confrontations between secular and Islamist forces in Bangladesh over the last year. Now, al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri has issued a call for jihad in Bangladesh, the fourth largest Muslim nation in the world.

The radical Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and activists of its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir, have raised the standard of revolt by aligning themselves with the radical Hefajat-e-Islam (HeI) in violent opposition across the country against the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT – a domestic creation) verdicts in the trials of senior Jamaat leaders accused of war crimes during the 1971 liberation struggle. Most of the accused were sent to the gallows.

The schism in Bangladesh society deepened further along party lines as well, with the ruling “pro-liberation” secular parties led by the Awami League opposed by the pro-Islamist Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which colludes with extremist groups such as HeI and JeI (the latter was recently

banned from participating in elections).

The political situation became unstable when JeI leader Abdul Qadeer Molla was executed for war crimes on December 12, 2013. The Islamists have since unleashed a wave of violence against the country's minorities, killing Hindus and Christians and vandalizing their property (*The Hindu* [Chennai], January 8; *Dhaka Tribune*, January 11). Minorities in Bangladesh have always endured the brunt of political and religious violence, even if they are not directly involved in the events that precipitated it. Their support (particularly that of the Hindu minority) for the secular Awami League government makes them targets of Jamaat Shibir extremists who seek to create an Islamic state in Bangladesh.

The direst implication of the ongoing crisis in Bangladesh is that it has reinvigorated dormant Islamist militant groups. Outlawed and decimated militant groups see opportunities to reorganize and consolidate in the current religiously-charged environment. The February 2013 standoff between secularists/atheists and pro-Islamist groups at Dhaka's Shahabag intersection sparked the emergence of banned clandestine militant groups that came forward in support of mainstream Islamist organizations like JeI and HeI. Proscribed militant groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, Harakatul-Jihad-i-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the newly-formed Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) surfaced with a jihadist agenda.

Existing militant groups like HuJI-B and JMB have tried to restructure themselves under the names Tanjim e-Tamiruddin and BEM:

- Tanjim-e-Tamiruddin (TeT) is one of the offshoots of HuJI-B. TeT was founded by the currently detained HuJI-B leader Maulana Abdur Rauf. TeT is now led by Khalilur Rahman (a.k.a Shahriar), who was arrested in Dhaka last October in possession of firearms and explosives along with three accomplices (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], October 8, 2013). In August 2013, Bangladesh police arrested nine TeT militants, along with arms, incriminating documents and provocative literature, including Takbiatul Iman, a book that claims Muslims in Bangladesh were tortured, assaulted and killed after Sheikh Hasina (Awami League leader and present Prime Minister) assumed power. These arrests and further investigations shed light on the HuJI and JMB joint effort to reorganise the militant movements in Bangladesh (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], August 16, 2013).
- BEM is an offshoot of the banned Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). This was disclosed after security

forces arrested at least three militants in the town of Bogra in August 2013. During interrogation, the arrested militants reportedly confessed that the JMB is now operating under the new BEM platform (*Dhaka Tribune*, August 24, 2013). Police have yet to discover the structure and membership of BEM. Even its full name is not yet known.

Besides these local groups, the ABT and its firebrand spiritual leader, Mufti Jasim Uddin Rahmani, created a ripple in Bangladesh in 2013 following the killing of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider. An incendiary speech by Rahmani and sermons full of jihadi rhetoric inspired ABT activists to kill the blogger in February 2013. Rahmani was arrested along with 30 other ABT activists in August 2013 (BanglaNews24, September 2, 2013). Rahmani's support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda is well known in Bangladesh and displayed in his published works and speeches. There are also media reports that ABT draws inspiration from the works of the late al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) ideologue, Anwar al-Awlaki (*Dhaka Tribune*, August 15, 2013).

The Bangladesh crisis has been given an alarming degree of attention by international jihadist organizations. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, came forward on January 14 to urge a popular uprising (*intifada*) against government and "anti-Islamic forces" in Bangladesh. Al-Zawahiri calls on the Muslims of Bangladesh "to confront the crusader onslaught against Islam," which, according to al-Zawahiri, "is being orchestrated by the leading criminals in the [Indian] subcontinent and the West against Islam." The 30 minute-long message was released by al-Qaeda media arm As-Sahab under the title "Bangladesh: Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence." [1] The video brought up many issues, including the alleged existence of an "anti-Islamic movement" and alleged atrocities by Bangladeshi security forces. While calling on Muslims to fight, al-Zawahiri also lamented: "My dear Muslim brothers, thousands of people are being killed in the streets of Bangladesh without any guilt, except they have come out to protect against the collusion of an anti-Islam secular government with a bunch of transgressing secularists who are heaping insults and vulgar abuses on Islam and the prophet of Islam."

As a transnational jihadi network, al-Qaeda has maintained a strong support base in Bangladesh since the late 1990s. Fazlul Rahman of the Jihad Movement of Bangladesh, the former leader of HuJI-B, was one of the original signatories of the fatwa issued by Osama bin Laden in February 1998 urging action against the United States. In 2002 both the *Asia Times* and *Time Magazine* reported large numbers of al-Qaeda militants landing in Chittagong (with *Time* including

Ayman al-Zawahiri as one of the fugitives) (Asia Times, September 21, 2002; *Time Magazine*, October 21, 2002). The Time story was refuted by both the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka (which cited its “numerous unsubstantiated allegations”) and by the Bangladesh government, which described the report as “fictitious, baseless and imaginative” (*Frontline* [New Delhi], November 9-22, 2002).

Despite its support for (and infiltration of) established local militant groups, al-Qaeda has so far failed to establish its own cells in Bangladesh. However, this is not to conclude that Bangladeshi Muslims, especially the diaspora community, have failed to connect with al-Qaeda’s call. Rajib Karim, a JMB activist who once lived and worked in the United Kingdom came under the influence of AQAP’s Anwar al-Awlaki and began serving a 30-year prison sentence for terrorist offenses in February 2011 (BBC, February 28, 2011). Similarly, Qazi Mohammad Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis, a Bangladesh national who tried to blow up the Federal Reserve Bank Building in lower Manhattan, New York, was sentenced to 30 years in prison after pleading guilty to terrorism charges in August 2013 (CBS New York, August 9, 2013).

Al-Zawahiri’s call for Bangladeshis to become involved in transnational jihad raises many questions within the Bangladesh security establishment, most important of which is whether the Islamist groups calling for a Shari’a-based caliphate in Bangladesh will be influenced by the al-Qaeda leader’s rhetoric. Even if the latest appeal from al-Qaeda does not trigger militant attacks in Bangladesh, messages of this type still help local militant groups to recruit and gather funds for future action.

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#### Note

1. As-Sa āb Media, “Bangladesh: A Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence,” January 14, 2014, <https://alfidaa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=90348>.

## The Struggle for Arabistan: Tensions and Militancy in Iran’s Khuzestan Province

*Chris Zambelis*

Thousands of Iranians were reported to have sought medical attention in November 2013 due to complaints of shortness of breath and other maladies following a spell of acid rain that blanketed parts of the southwestern province of Khuzestan. Due to the impact of the local oil industry – over 90 percent of Iran’s oil capacity is located in Khuzestan Province – and other factors, the World Health Organization (WHO) named Ahvaz, the provincial capital, as the world’s most polluted city (*Tehran Times* [Tehran], October 19, 2013). Yet the latest environmental catastrophe to befall Khuzestan Province has overshadowed the predicament of the region’s sizeable ethnic Arab population. The Iranian Arab ethnic minority known as the Ahvazi (Arabic: Ahwazi) Arabs has endured oppression and discrimination by the hands of the state. It also eclipsed a series of attacks against energy infrastructure attributed to ethnic Arab nationalist insurgents led by the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA) (Ahwaz News Agency, November 28, 2013).

In a public statement, the ASMLA claimed responsibility for a November 27 attack against a natural gas pipeline running from the towns of Shadegan and Sarbandar. According to ASMLA spokesman Habib Nabgan, the attack was executed by the Majid al-Baghbeh Martyrs Battalion of the Mohiuddin al-Nasser Martyrs Brigade, part of the ASMLA’s armed wing. Nabgan’s statement elaborated on what he called a “heroic operation” executed by the “valiant Ahazvi national resistance” against “oil and gas facilities that are the backbone of the Iranian economy” (Ahwaz News Agency, November 28, 2013). Nabgan, who also heads the ASMLA’s political wing, the National Resistance of al-Ahwaz, is a longtime activist for Iranian Arab causes. He previously led the banned Lejnat al-Wefaq (Reconciliation Committee) and other efforts on behalf of ethnic Arab and other minority causes in Iran. Nabgan operates in exile from Denmark, where he received political asylum (Press TV [Tehran], November 18, 2013).

The attack was the sixth perpetrated by the ASMLA in 2013. It also occurred days after the airing of a documentary produced by Iran’s Press TV showing taped confessions of three alleged members of the ASMLA to an attack against a natural gas pipeline in the town of Shush and an earlier strike against a train carrying oil near the Haft Tephah train station in October and September 2012, respectively. The alleged assailants also claimed responsibility for an

additional 20 militant operations and stated that they had received financial support and operational training in Dubai (Press TV, November 18, 2013). Defenders of the alleged assailants accused Iranian authorities of employing physical and psychological torture and other draconian methods to extract false confessions designed to malign the image of Iranian Arabs and undermine their legitimate demands (Ahwaz News Agency, November 23, 2013). In a seemingly related incident also affecting energy infrastructure in Khuzestan Province, Iranian authorities reported that security forces defused an explosive device planted on an oil pipeline linking the cities of Abadan and Mahshahr (Fars News Agency [Tehran], December 1, 2013). The ASMLA and other ethnic Arab militant organizations operating in Khuzestan Province have mounted diverse operations over the years ranging from traditional terrorist and insurgent-style attacks targeting symbols of the state (including the security services), assassinations of political and religious leaders and attacks against soft civilian targets such as banks (al-Jazeera [Doha], January 24, 2006; June 12, 2005). Importantly, the ASMLA has since committed to attacking only critical energy infrastructure targets to limit the possibility of civilian casualties (Ahwaz News Agency, November 28, 2013).

A glimpse at the human and physical geography of Khuzestan Province is essential to understanding the circumstances that have contributed to the recent turbulence. Iran has contended with multiple episodes of violent unrest and insurgency rooted in ethnic, religious, socioeconomic and ideological grievances, many of which predate the formation of the Islamic Republic. Iranian Arabs suffer from widespread poverty and other socioeconomic problems, despite the fact that they inhabit a region rich in natural resources. They also complain of being subject to what they see as a calculated policy of ethnic and cultural discrimination by a state that sees them as threats to internal unity and pawns of hostile foreign interests. In this regard, Iranian Arabs claim to be the target of a deliberate campaign by the state to erase their Arab cultural identity in favor of the ethnic Persian-dominated character propagated by the Islamic Republic. As a result, Iranian Arabs tend to frame their struggle through different prisms, including a combination of ethnic, nationalist, social justice or human rights discourses. The cultural and topographical nomenclature attributed to Iranian Arabs and Khuzestan Province is also the subject of contention. For example, Iranian Arabs often point to Iran's policy of forcibly changing the original Arabic names of towns and other landmarks as proof of its goal to purge Arab culture. Consequently, political movements promoting Iranian Arab causes can advocate a range of solutions, including irredentism, autonomy and nationalism under the broader

framework of Iranian citizenship. [1]

While estimates of the demographic breakdown of Khuzestan Province tend to be politicized, between two and four million Iranian Arabs are believed to inhabit the region. Equally important, Iranian Arabs are overwhelmingly Shi'a in their beliefs, with a minority of Sunni followers. At the same time, there are signs that members of the Shi'a community are converting to Sunni Islam in what may represent an attempt to assert a new identity distinct from the Shi'a tradition represented by the Islamic Republic (al-Arabiya [Dubai], April 14, 2011).

Iranian Arabs and many pan-Arab nationalists refer to Khuzestan Province as Arabistan after the historical Arab-dominated territory that enjoyed a period of limited autonomy and relative independence in different periods of history. Khuzestan Province is located adjacent to Iraq's southern Basra Province. As a result, Iranian Arabs share close cultural affinities, including common linguistic attributes and a shared tribal lineage, with their ethnic kin across the border (*Egyptian Gazette* [Cairo], November 11, 2011). The struggle for control of Khuzestan Province and its energy resources was central to Iraq's strategy during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Saddam Hussein's Iraq, a longtime supporter of Iranian Arab political and militant movements, calculated that Iranian Arabs would revolt against Iran and side with Iraq. However, Iranian Arabs remained loyal to Tehran throughout the Iran-Iraq War. Nevertheless, the impact of Iraqi-tinged Arab nationalist discourse and Baathist ideology continues to permeate the agenda of groups such as the ASMLA that seek the creation of a reconstituted Arabistan (see *Terrorism Monitor*, October 14, 2011). In April 2011, Ahvaz and other locations across Khuzestan were the scene of protests to commemorate the anniversary of an earlier uprising in 2005. The protests were dubbed the Ahvaz "day of rage" by local activists in an obvious effort to emulate the popular opposition protests witnessed around the Arab world. The demonstrations elicited a violent crackdown by Iranian authorities that left scores of dead and wounded (al-Jazeera, April 16, 2011).

The geopolitical repercussions of unrest in Khuzestan Province warrant closer attention. In response to Iran's steadfast support for the Baathist regime in Syria, notable segments of the political and armed opposition in Syria have acknowledged the Iranian Arab struggle. A detachment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) named itself the al-Ahwaz Battalion in a sign of solidarity with the Iranian Arab cause and to single out Iran's support for the Baathist regime. A delegation of ASMLA officials traveled to Syria to meet with ranking members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in September

2012 (Ahwaz News Agency, November 25, 2012; August 7, 2013). Furthermore, an attack by the ASMLA against energy infrastructure in Khuzestan Province was dedicated to the Syrian opposition (Reuters, August 15, 2013). ASMLA head Nabgan has lauded the exploits of ethnic Baloch militants such as Jaysh al-Adl (JAA, Army of Justice) operating in Iran's southeastern province of Sistan-Balochistan and the ethnic Kurdish Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistan (PJAK, Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan) in their respective campaigns against the Islamic Republic. He also stated that the ASMLA will continue to resist Iran and will coordinate with its Baloch and Kurdish militant counterparts (Ahwaz News Agency, November 28, 2013). The ASMLA's predilection for targeting energy infrastructure also raises an important set of concerns given the increasing likelihood of Iran's eventual, albeit piecemeal, return to global energy markets.

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#### Note

1. For an overview of Iranian Arab grievances, see "Ahwazi Arabs," Unrepresented Peoples and Nations Organization (Netherlands), June 2010, [http://www.unpo.org/images/member\\_profile/ahwaziprofile2010june.pdf](http://www.unpo.org/images/member_profile/ahwaziprofile2010june.pdf).

## Tripoli Battles Shadowy Qaddafists While Tribal Rivals Fight Over Southern Libya

*Andrew McGregor*

Despite living in the midst of some of the world's most open and sparsely populated spaces, Libya's southern tribes are engaged in a new round of bitter urban warfare, as snipers, gun-battles and mortar fire take a heavy toll on the civilian population. At stake are control over the abundant resources of the Libyan south, the heavy traffic of its trade routes (both licit and illicit) and the future of tribal and ethnic relations in a post-Qaddafist south. Simultaneous with these disputes, however, is the mysterious and oddly-timed emergence of "Qaddafist supporters" waving green flags (the symbol of the Qaddafist revolution) in several different Libyan centers, most notably in the southern oasis settlement of Sabha, where they were alleged to have seized an airbase.

### Sabha, the Strategic Hub of South-West Libya

Since late December, the strategic oasis city of Sabha has been the scene of deadly clashes between the Tubu, a tribe of indigenous Black African nomads ranging through the eastern Sahara, and the Awlad Sulayman, a traditionally nomadic Arab tribe of the Fezzan (southwestern Libya). Sabha, a city of 210,000 people about 400 miles south of Tripoli, is the site of an important military base and airfield. It also serves as a commercial and transportation hub for the Fezzan. Many of the residents are economic migrants from Niger, Chad and the Sudan, while the Qaddadfa (the tribe of Mu'ammarr Qaddafi) and the Awlad Sulayman are among the more prominent Arab tribes found in Sabha. One of the last strongholds of the Qaddafi loyalists, Sabha was taken by revolutionary militias in September 2011. [1]

In March 2012, three days of vicious fighting in Sabha that began as a dispute between the Tubu and the Arab Abu Seif and morphed into a battle between the Tubu and the Awlad Sulayman left 40 Tubu and 30 Arabs dead. After a ceasefire ended the fighting by the end of the month, serious clashes erupted in Sabha once more on January 11. Tubu militants directed mortar fire into Sabha from the edge of town, targeting Awlad Sulayman neighborhoods. The street violence reached such a peak that the Sabha National Security Directorate admitted it no longer had the resources to even attempt to maintain law and order. The Sabha Local Council was forced to suspend operations in late December. On January 17, mortars struck the residence of Sabha's military governor. The region is desperately short of medical supplies, a situation worsened by gunmen who stole part of an emergency shipment of medical supplies from the UAE and an attack on the Sabha hospital (Libya Herald, January 17; January 20).

It appears to have been fallout from this earlier struggle that sparked the latest clashes, as Tubu gunmen from Murzuk stormed a Traghen police station (140 kilometers south of Sabha) on January 9. The gunmen ignored a number of high value targets as they searched specifically for al-Haq Brigade leader Mansur al-Aswad, the deputy commander of the Sabha military zone. The brigade leader was eventually found and murdered, allegedly in retaliation for crimes committed by his Abu Seif militia during the 2012 clashes in Sabha (Libya Herald, January 10).

Both the Tubu and Zuwaya, rivals in Kufra, have communities in the coastal city of Ajdabiya, that city being the northern terminus of the trade routes that run through Kufra to the north. The conflict has travelled north through this route to Ajdabiya, where a Zuwaya unit under the command of the



general staff has had deadly clashes with a Tubu unit under the command of the Defense Ministry (AFP, December 23, 2013).

Misrata's 154 Battalion joined Libyan Army regulars heading to Sabha to restore order (Libya Herald, January 20). The Tubu arrived at reconciliation talks attended by several leading government ministers and a Zintani reconciliation committee with three demands they insisted be met before negotiations could continue:

- Establishing exactly who the Tubu were fighting (an issue complicated by the tendency of imported Arab militias to ally themselves with local Arab groups);
- The expulsion of Awlad Sulayman gunmen from local military compounds and the historic Elena castle (formerly known as Fortezza Margherita), an Italian colonial relic that still dominates Sabha;
- The transfer of the castle, still used for military purposes and detentions, to the Ministry of Tourism (Libya Herald, January 22).

According to Isa Abd al-Majid Mansour, leader of the Tubu Front for the Salvation of Libya, the violence in the south is designed to eliminate the Tubu presence in Libya: "This is not a tribal war... The Islamist militias aided by the Libyan government want to get rid of us. International bodies that come to investigate will see who are the victims, with what arms and in which conditions they were shot. They will know that innocent people are taken from their homes and shot by 14.5mm caliber [weapons]" (*Paris Match*, January 20). Isa Abd al-Majid insists that Sabha has become a headquarters for al-Qaeda forces drawn from Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania. (*Paris Match*, January 20).

### The Mysterious Qaddafiists

A group of "Qaddafiists" were reported to have seized Tamenhint Air-base (30 kilometers east of Sabha) on January 18, relinquishing it after sorties by Libyan jet-fighters on January 19 to redeploy "with a large convoy" on the road between Sabha and Barak Shati, according to a Zintani mediator (Libya Herald, January 19). According to the spokesman for the Libyan defense ministry, the occupiers were Qaddafi supporters (al-Arabiya, January 18).

After the Qaddafiists left, the base was occupied by Tubu troops of the Murzuk Military Council, though these withdrew on January 20 before the arrival of the Misrata militia, allowing the Qaddafiists to reoccupy the facility. Defense Ministry spokesman Abdul-Raziq al-Shabahi said: "The situation in the south ... opened a chance for some

criminals ... loyal to the Gaddafi regime to exploit this and to attack the Tamahind air force base" (Reuters, January 20). Libyan government sources claim the violence in the south is being orchestrated by Saadi Qaddafi, a son of the late dictator who has taken refuge in neighboring Niger.

Other pro-Qaddafi elements were said to have taken to the streets in Ajilat, waving green flags and carrying portraits of the late dictator. The Zintan militia was called in when local authorities were unable to contain the demonstrations and five alleged Qaddafi supporters supposedly on their way to Ajilat were killed in nearby Sabratha. Though authorities claimed to have arrested seven Qaddafiists, they refused to release any information about the suspects (Libya Herald, January 22).

Oddly, there was also a manifestation of green-flag waving "Qaddafiists" who tried to attack the Italian section of a non-Muslim cemetery in Tripoli. The group was driven off by locals, but has apparently returned at night twice to damage graves, even killing the night-watchman in their second visit. West of Zahra, other alleged Qaddafiists were reported to have raised the green flag (Libya Herald, January 20).

The identity of the alleged Qaddafiists remains in question. In Sabha, citizens became alarmed when reports began to circulate that the Qaddafiists were actually "foreign troops from Chad," prompting a formal Libyan government denial (Libya Herald, January 21).

Tubu militias have occupied two other important military bases in Libya's largely ungoverned southwest, a refuge for smugglers and terrorists. Wegh airbase was occupied by Colonel Wardoku's Murzuk Desert Shield militia and the military post at al-Tum was occupied by the Oum al-Aranib militia commanded by Sharfadeen Barka.

Qaddafiists have also been blamed for the violence in the Ajilat region (on Libya's northwest coast), where a militia from Zawiya has been fighting with the Warshefana tribe, which has regularly been accused of pro-Qaddafiist tendencies.

The neighboring groups have been fighting sporadically since the overthrow of Qaddafi, deploying weapons as large as Grad rockets. Misrati forces armed with Katyusha rockets and Zintani militia fighters were deployed to intervene in the fighting alongside armor belonging to the National Army (Libya Herald, January 21). The Misrata militia and Tripoli militias were withdrawn on January 21 after 18 people died in clashes, with local authorities comparing the actions of the militias to those of the Italian colonial army (Libya Herald, January 22). The Warshefana are regularly accused of being

pro-Qaddafi and held responsible for a wave of kidnappings and car-jackings around Tripoli.

### The Killings in Kufra

A seemingly intractable conflict in Kufra Oasis between the Tubu and the Zuwaya Arabs (who seized the region from the Tubu in 1840) flared up again on January 20, as Arabs and Tubu shelled each other with mortars over the next few days. The struggle between the two tribes, both of whom would like to have full control of the smuggling/trade routes that run from the African interior through Kufra, has also been carried on by continuing tit-for-tat kidnappings of random members of rival communities.

However, Isa Abd al-Majid, leader of the Tubu fighters around Kufra, does not identify the Zuwaya as the real problem in the region: “We are fighting al-Qaeda. They want to eradicate us to occupy our land and control the frontiers with Chad and Niger, which will permit them to attack the French military base in Niger and kidnap Westerners” (Paris Match, January 20).

### Government Response – Revival of the Militias

Libya’s ruling General National Council (GNC) declared a State of Emergency on January 18, citing the clashes in Sabha. Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan called on the revolutionary militias to rally to the south to expel the Qaddafists and restore order in the south and other security “hotspots” (Libya Herald, January 18). The government’s decision to recall the militias in the midst of efforts to demobilize them and integrate their members into the Libyan National Army has dismayed many Libyans who have become exasperated with the militias’ roadblocks and almost daily violence. Prime Minister Zeidan said the Misrata militia had been “commissioned by the government to conduct a national task... to spread security stability in the region” (al-Arabiya, January 18). Tubu Colonel Barka Warduko, the head of the Murzuk Military Council, claimed that Ali Zeidan was provoking and exploiting tribal clashes in the south to create a security crisis that would prevent the replacement of his government (Libya Herald, January 21).

The GNC released a statement insisting it had not abandoned laws 27 and 53 (ordering the demobilization of the militias), but their recall was an effective admission that the government security forces are unable to restore security on their own, providing the militias with a reason for their continued existence. Many Libyans felt the militias had lost the justification for their existence after the Misrata Brigade opened fire on anti-militia demonstrators in Tripoli

on November 15, 2013, killing 47 people. Though the GNC claims it has not reversed its policy on militia demobilization, it is now clearly saying one thing and doing another.

Tubu demonstrators blockaded the Sarir power station (near Jalu Oasis in eastern Libya) for several weeks in December and January to demand greater representation in Kufra’s municipal government and an extension of the power supply to the Tubu community at Rebyana.

Other Tubu have been integrated into the National Army, most notably the mostly Tubu 25th Brigade, charged with guarding the Sarir, Messla and al-Shula oil facilities in eastern Libya. Three soldiers of the 25th Brigade on a supply run from Sarir to the nearby Jalu Oasis were ambushed and killed in mid-January. The unit’s commander, Saleh Muhammad, speculated that the gunmen might have been the same as those responsible for a late December attack on a Sarir farm project, in which five attackers were killed and the project manager was kidnapped (Libya Herald, January 18). Workers at the Sarir power station stopped work the next day due to security concerns, causing power shortages in Tripoli and Benghazi (Libya Herald, January 20).

### Conclusion

By January 22, reconciliation talks had helped ease the intensity of the fighting in Sabha, though Sabha military commander Muhammad al-Ayat al-Busaif suggested there was still a problem with “Qaddafi loyalists, some of whom remain in the surrounding area, including the Tamenhint airbase” (Libya Herald, January 22). The Qaddafists remain shadowy, unidentified characters that provide the Tripoli government with a reason to reactivate its reliance on a more tangible threat, Libya’s unruly and independent militias.

The emergence of the elusive Qaddafists could, as suggested by some, be part of an effort to create an external security crisis (as opposed to Libya’s internal security crisis) to preserve the Zeidan administration at a time when it is under strong criticism. While there is serious opposition to Zeidan’s government, there is no consensus on a replacement – considering Libya’s current state and the inability of the government to enforce its writ almost anywhere, it is questionable whether anyone would really want the job. Faced with the possibility of a non-confidence vote, Zeidan remarked: “I would be happy if the vote went through” (Middle East Online, January 20).

The Tubu are in the midst of a cultural revival (similar to that of the North African Berbers) as the tribe asserts its non-Arab status and demands recognition in the forthcoming

Libyan constitution. They are unlikely to return quietly to the days when Qaddafi called them foreigners and withdrew their Libyan identity cards.

Regardless of who is responsible for starting or perpetuating each round of Tubu-Arab violence, there is no doubt that such violence encourages the incipient Tubu separatist movement, closely tied to the Tubu cultural revival. Though there is no proof of such intentions, it remains possible that some acts of Tubu violence may be committed by independence-minded militants with the intent of provoking further clashes to politicize the rest of the community. However, the growth of a Tubu separatist/independence movement in Libya would create immediate concerns in Chad and Niger, which also host Tubu populations with considerable military experience and expertise in modern desert fighting.

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#### Note

1. For previous clashes in Sabha, see “Arab-Tubu Clashes in Southern Libya’s Sabha Oasis,” *Terrorism Monitor*, April 5, 2012 and “Libya’s Sabha Oasis: Former Qaddafist Stronghold Becoming Regional Center of Insecurity,” *Terrorism Monitor*, April 19, 2013.