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Algerian men from the Mozabites community, a Berber minority group in Ghardaia

BERBER-ARAB CLASHES IN ALGERIA’S M’ZAB VALLEY

Andrew McGregor

The ongoing Berber cultural revival in North Africa has gone hand-in-hand with a new political assertiveness. In nations such as Libya, Algeria and Mali, this has at times resulted in armed clashes and protests demanding linguistic rights and political recognition of Berber (Amazigh) communities. The latest of these confrontations is now underway in the south Algerian oasis of Ghardaïa, where Chaamba Arabs have clashed repeatedly with the indigenous Mozabite Berbers, forcing Algiers to send security forces to restore law and order in the region.

Communal violence broke out in May 2013 following an alleged attempt by Chaamba Arabs to use forged property records to take over a Mozabite cemetery (Algérie Presse Service, May 8, 2013). The dispute degenerated into sword-wielding youth gangs throwing petrol bombs at each other in the streets of Ghardaïa, the largest city in the M’zab Valley. Shops were also burned in Berriane as the violence spread to the other cities of the M’zab (*El-Watan* [Algiers], January 26).

For years, Berbers have accused the Algerian Gendarmerie Nationale of pro-Arab bias and even of encouraging Arab rioters, charges that seemed to have been confirmed when three officers were suspended after a video emerged showing their participation in violence that resulted in the death of a young Berber (AP, January 29). According to a local Mozabite activist, “We are Algerian citizens first. We want justice and the truth to be told about what happened in Ghardaïa and that crimes be punished. Those officers whose bias has been proven need to be punished. We say no to violence, no to impunity, yes to tolerance” (*El-Watan* [Algiers], January 26).

Violent clashes between the Arab and Berber communities in Berriane began in March 2008 and continued at lesser levels throughout that year until mass violence broke out

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again in April 2009 (*El-Khabar* [Algiers], May 20, 2008; *Tout sur l'Algerie*, April 17, 2009). Heated protests against endemic unemployment in the midst of an oil-producing region were common in the first half of 2013, reflecting growing tensions in the area. Much of the violence has been carried out by youth gangs from the Berber and Arab communities.

The fighting pits the Chaamba Arabs, who follow the Maliki madhhab (one of the four orthodox schools of Islamic jurisprudence) and the Mozabite Berbers, who follow the non-orthodox Ibadite form of Islam. Ibadite Islam is a more moderate offshoot of the early Islamic Kharijite movement, whose advocacy of jihad against rulers they deemed insufficiently Islamic led to nearly two centuries of conflict in the Islamic world. The Ibadite movement retained a socially conservative attitude with an emphasis on the Quran and a more tolerant attitude towards other forms of Islam. Most remaining Ibadites are found in Oman, but smaller communities can be found in isolated oases and islands in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Zanzibar. Mozabite conservatism is now under stress from both young Mozabites who have been educated elsewhere and from new non-Mozabite arrivals in the M'zab Valley. Despite the insularity of the Mozabite community, the Mozabites have built a commercial network linking the M'zab with the cities of the Mediterranean coast.

The Berbers of the M'zab can trace their lineage back to the regional Berber capital of Tiaret in northern Algeria. When Tiaret was taken by the Fatimid Shiites in 933, Ibadite Berbers began to move south, first to Ourgla Oasis, and finally on to M'zab in the early 11th century. They were followed by other Ibadite Berbers escaping pressure from new waves of Arab tribesmen arriving from the Arabian Peninsula (particularly the Banu Hillal). Ghardaïa, the largest city in the M'zab with over 90,000 residents, was first settled in 1097. The valley is now home to over 400,000 people. The traditionally nomadic Chaamba began settling in the M'zab oases one hundred years ago, a process that has been accelerated in recent decades by the growth of the petroleum industry, loss of pastures and government discouragement of nomadic lifestyles. The two communities have never integrated in M'zab. Whenever communal violence breaks out, both communities typically blame the other. However, despite sectarian and ethnic differences between the Berbers and Arabs, many residents claim the fighting is actually being fuelled by rivalries between drug smuggling networks working in the area (AFP, January 30).

The M'zab consists of seven cities about 600 kilometers south of Algiers, including a cluster of five in the south (the "pentapolis"); Ghardaïa, al-Atteuf, Melika, Bani Isguen and Bounoura, with two other more isolated communities,

Berriane and Guerrara, lying further north. The strategic location of the M'zab Valley at the upper edge of the Sahara desert made it an important crossroads for various trans-Saharan trade routes. After the arrival of the French in Algeria in the mid-19th century the Mozabites paid a tribute in exchange for autonomy, but the entire region was eventually annexed by France in 1882.

Aside from the death of three Mozabites in the latest sectarian violence, the most shocking development was the Chaamba destruction of the tomb of Amir Moussa, a UNESCO designated world heritage site (Agence Kabyle d'Information, January 14). The Amir was a Mozabite leader of the 16th century who is ironically remembered for leading efforts to integrate the Arab nomads into the M'zab community in 1586 (AFP, January 30). The ancient Mozabite cemetery in Ghardaïa was also destroyed by marauding Arab youths.

On January 27, Mozabite activist Dr. Kameleddine Fekhar issued a statement, purportedly speaking on behalf of the Mozabite community that demanded the departure of the Abd al-Malik Sellal government and urged a boycott of April's upcoming presidential election. The statement complains of the "racist aggression" of police-supported militias armed with swords and knives that pillage and burn at will. Arrests followed by torture are determined solely on a racial basis, according to the statement (Siwel – Agence Kabyle d'Information, January 29). Prime Minister Sellal visited M'zab in January when tensions seemed to be easing, but fighting erupted with new intensity only days after his departure.

SALAFIST AL-NUR PARTY STRUGGLES TO KEEP POLITICAL ISLAM ALIVE IN EGYPT

Andrew McGregor

With former president Muhammad Mursi in prison and the Muslim Brotherhood declared a terrorist organization, political Islam is struggling to survive in Egypt today. With the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) expelled from the political scene, the Islamist torch has passed to the Salafist Nur Party, led by Younes Makhoun. The party, established in 2011 by Egypt's Dawa al-Salafiya (Salafist Call) movement (a Salafist rival to the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1970s), took nearly a quarter of the vote in the 2011 parliamentary elections after forming a coalition with three smaller Salafist parties, making it the second-most powerful Islamist party in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood's FJP. The party endured a bitter split in December 2012 over the role of al-Dawa al-Salafiya clerics in daily decision-making in the Nur Party (see

Terrorism Monitor, January 25, 2013).

During the short rule of the Muslim Brotherhood's FJP, the Nur ("Light") Party did not provide the automatic support to the Brotherhood's initiatives that many expected, preferring to set its own course to avoid being too closely identified with the Brothers. The party was prominent in its support of the military takeover in July 2013, a move taken to avoid political isolation. This political strategy effectively saved the Nur Party from the fate that met the Brotherhood. Party leader Makhion believes the Brotherhood's confrontational approach propelled its downfall:

I think that what they did was suicide. They chose the path of confrontation and used violence. They have not been committed to their ethics, offending many with accusations of apostasy, slander, and indecencies in all forms. There is no doubt that it has become very difficult for them to return to political life, unless they reevaluate themselves and apologize to the Egyptian people for what they did. They must reevaluate their approach and their ideology (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 29).

The Nur Party joined the Grand Imam of al-Azhar and Coptic Pope Tawadros II in calling on Egyptians to participate in January's constitutional referendum, saying it served "the interests of the homeland and the goals of Islamic law" (*Daily News Egypt*, January 11). Though the referendum approved the new constitution with an astonishing 98.1 percent of the vote, turnout was only 39 percent, too low for the vote to be regarded as a firm endorsement by the Egyptian people. Campaigning for a "no" vote was officially discouraged and a "yes" vote was presented as the only way to restore stability to Egypt. The vote was boycotted by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and turnout by Nur Party loyalists was low in support of a new constitution that has discarded most of the Islamic language that the party had lobbied for before the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood government. Nur Party support for the new constitution seemed surprising, given that one of its articles bans religion-based political parties, but Yasser Borhami, deputy head of al-Dawa al-Salafiya, insists that the Nur Party is protected by the second article of the constitution, which states that Shari'a is the main source of legislation in Egypt (*al-Arabiya*, January 9).

Approval of the new constitution is widely viewed as being the first step in a run for the presidency by armed forces commander-in-chief Field Marshal Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. The Nur Party is not expected to field a candidate for the presidency, citing the Brotherhood's "failed experiment," though the party is not prepared to support al-Sisi's candidacy until "fuller explanations" are given of the public bloodshed

that followed the military coup, particularly the massacre of Muslim Brotherhood supporters at northern Cairo's Raba'a al-Adawiya mosque (Reuters, January 23). The government established a commission to investigate the incidents on January 6, though it is not expected to report its findings for six months.

The Nur Party publicly rejects partisan politics and prefers the establishment of strong state institutions over the creation of strongman figures who will inevitably disappoint. Makhion condemns the Brotherhood's attempt to monopolize power, favoring a more inclusive style of government:

We have always stated that we will not rule, but we will help govern. After any revolution, no one faction should ever bear the responsibility of all. All who participated in the revolution and the undoing of the former regime should take part in rebuilding the state. Nor should one faction rule alone because it obtained a majority of the vote. All the people must be included in building the state, in case an uprising should take place. Our policy is that we govern, we do not rule. And the difference between ruling and governing is that governing takes advantage of everyone's talents and expertise; that the right man is put in the right position regardless of ideology or party affiliation (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 29).

The Party avoided any sign of support for Mursi after he was deposed last year and appears to be shifting slightly towards the political center, though such a move risks losing the party's highly-conservative core supporters. According to Yasser Borhami, deputy head of al-Dawa al-Salafiya: "We have won respect from the people for our moderate positions... Maybe we lost some support from within the Islamic movement, but many have admired the party's policies" (Reuters, January 23).

Nur Party leader Makhion nonetheless believes that there is still a potential pool of support for political Islam in Egypt, despite the performance of the Brotherhood's FJP:

We felt that we should not employ religion as a tool in a political conflict or frame what was happening as a religious conflict between Islamists and non-Islamists, because that simply was not true. Using religion in this way is unfounded and will lead to conflict, causing us to lose the faith of the Egyptian people... Those who came out [to the mass anti-Mursi protests] on June 30 were not against Islam, religion, or the rule of law, nor were they against the Islamist vision, for they have never truly seen the Islamist vision actually play out (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 29).

“With These Guns We Will Return to Kurdistan”: The Resurgence of Kurdish Jihadism

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Kurdish jihadist militants, who were dealt a devastating blow by the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, have recently made a powerful resurgence thanks to the absence of U.S. troops in Iraq and the safe havens for extremism created by the Syrian civil war. Kurdish jihadists with affiliations to al-Qaeda pose a major threat to the Iraqi Kurds, who have successfully built a relatively safe and autonomous enclave in an otherwise war-torn country. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups carried out bloody attacks in Iraqi Kurdistan in January, increasing worries that Iraq's only safe region might become engulfed in turmoil.

Kurdish jihadists pose a threat to the Kurdish community's new-found autonomy in Syria, carrying out suicide attacks in Kurdish cities and elsewhere in Syria against regime positions, including Aleppo. The first sign of trouble for the Iraqi Kurds was the September 25, 2013 attack in Erbil that targeted local security forces, killing six and injuring 60 others in response to security cooperation between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil (al-Monitor, September 30, 2013). In 2007, al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for a similar attack carried out against the Kurdish interior ministry in Erbil, which killed 19 and wounded 70 (AP, May 9, 2007; AKI Press, May 10, 2007).

Security forces in Kurdistan now fear that Iraqi Kurds with experience in Syria could return and carry out suicide attacks (Niqash, January 23). Over 200 young Iraqi Kurds have gone to Syria to join Islamist armed groups in Syria. It is possible that these Kurds have been trained for suicide missions (al-Monitor, December 14, 2013). It is likely that jihadist Kurds were involved in recent attacks in Erbil, Kirkuk and Sulaymaniya (al-Monitor, November 7, 2013).

The al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) threatened the two ruling Iraqi Kurdish parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – and rebels of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) operating in Syria in a video released in November 2013. “With these guns, we will return to Kurdistan [in Iraq] and we will kill all of the members of the KDP, PUK and security forces,” said a masked Kurdish ISIS member who identified himself as Abu Haris al-Kurdi (Kurdpress, November 18, 2013; the video was taken down by YouTube for violating its policy against violence).

For al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, Kurdish nationalism is a form of unbelief and prevents the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Kurdish Islamism is not something new. Islamism among the Kurds grew in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by the regional decline of Marxism, the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan and the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. [1].

Recently, Kurdish security forces carried out several raids on mosques in Sulaymaniya to stop the recruitment of Kurdish youth for the Syrian jihad and increased the monitoring of Iraqi Kurds returning from Syria (Rudaw, December 19, 2013; Niqash, January 23).

Most Iraqi Kurds who have joined al-Qaeda-affiliated groups come from Halabja, the historical stronghold of the Kurdish Islamist movement of Iraq. Lying along the border with Iran, Halabja suffers from poverty and health issues. The city suffered Saddam Hussein's wrath in 1988, when more than 5,000 people were killed by a chemical weapons attack.

With roots in the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood, the first Kurdish Islamist party was the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK), founded in Halabja in 1978 by Shaykh Uthman Abd al-Aziz in Halabja. The movement called for jihad against the Iraqi government. After the Iraqi Kurds became autonomous in 1991, the IMK became the region's third largest party (after the PUK and KDP) and clashed several times with the PUK. The movement fragmented after it decided to join the KRG in 1997.

Kurdish veterans returning from Afghanistan and Pakistan refused to join a secular government and created radical fringe groups such as Ansar al-Islam, led by cleric Najmeddin Faraj (a.k.a. Mullah Krekar), who is now serving a prison sentence in Norway.

Various Islamist militias controlled parts of Halabja until 2003, when the United States combined with the PUK to launch devastating attacks against Kurdish Islamists at the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003. These operations dislodged Islamist groups from their territory along the Iranian border. Many militants were killed or captured, while others fled to the country. [1] More radical Kurdish Islamists who feared arrest fled to Iran, Pakistan or other parts of Iraq. As a result, the Islamists lost their stronghold to Talabani's PUK security forces and were forced to disarm and accept electoral means as a way to power. Although Islamist parties were never able to get the majority of the votes, Islamism increased as a result of endemic corruption and lack of services. [2]

Violent Islamist protests against massage parlors, alcohol shops and blasphemy shows there is a part of the KRG's

population that is open to radicalization. After Islamist riots in Erbil, the Kurdish government closed down a local magazine for insulting Islam (Aknews, May 7, 2012). The United States was worried in 2009 that Kurdish government interference in religious affairs could cause resentment and radicalism among Kurds. [3]

Non-Islamist parties have increased their use of Islamic symbolism in the elections and the government has made many concessions to Islamist parties, such as accepting Islam as a basis of law in the Kurdistan region (Rudaw, June 30, 2013). Moreover, many Kurdish Islamists sympathize with the jihadi struggle in Syria as a fight against injustice and the oppression of their Muslim brothers by a non-Islamic government (Kurdistan Tribune, December 12, 2013). Members of Kurdish Islamist parties such as the IMK and KIG were arrested on suspicion of aiding jihadi groups last December (Xendan, December 23, 2013).

The current situation shows that the Syrian civil war has brought the al-Qaeda threat back to Kurdistan's doorstep, with the possibility of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups recruiting Kurds inside Iraq.

Although KRG president Masoud Barzani has not acknowledged the threat of Kurdish Islamism, he recently warned of infiltration by radical groups and even promised Baghdad support against any al-Qaeda threat, telling the European parliament: "I don't think that terrorists can create a base inside Kurdistan. They might want to infiltrate from Kirkuk or Mosul, but a permanent base in Kurdistan is impossible" (al-Monitor, January 22).

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Notes

1. David Romano, "An Outline of Kurdish Islamist Groups in Iraq," Jamestown Foundation, September 2007, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Jamestown-RomanoIraqiKurds_01.pdf.
2. Dominic Moran, "Iraq's KRG: Managing political Islam," ISN.ETH Zurich, June 20, 2008, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=88494>.
3. Wikileaks – U.S. Embassy Cable 09BAGHDAD429_a, "RRT Erbil: The Silent Imams, Dealing with Extremist Messages in the Kurdistan Region," February 18, 2009, https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BAGHDAD429_a.html.

Anti-Balaka Militias Target Muslims in the Central African Republic

Nicholas A. Heras

Recent fighting in the resource-rich Central African Republic (CAR) is inflicting a "human disaster" on the country. [1] Nearly one million residents of the country have been displaced, a majority of them from the northwestern region of the CAR that borders Cameroon and Chad, with over 370,000 displaced persons now in the country's capital of Bangui (Reuters, January 28). Approximately 2.2 million people, more than half of the country's population, are in immediate need of humanitarian assistance (UN News Centre, January 6). According to Reuters's estimate, at least 2,000 people were killed in the fighting between ethnic communities in the CAR during December 2013, when the Séléka rebel army overthrew the government of President François Bozize, an ethnic Gbaya (Reuters, January 28; al-Jazeera [Doha], December 15, 2013; for more information see Terrorism Monitor, January 9; April 3, 2013). Séléka is primarily composed of Muslim ethnic Gula, whose strength is bolstered by experienced Chadian and Sudanese volunteers.

Following Séléka's seizure of power in Bangui in April 2013, the organization's leader, Michel Djotodia, was elected as the CAR's interim president. Séléka, although officially disbanded by Djotodia, is accused by several international organizations of perpetrating systematic killings, rape, torture and the destruction of over 1,000 homes throughout the country. [2]

In response to Bozize's ouster, and the human rights abuses and killings conducted by Séléka fighters, anti-balaka (*balaka* = "machete" in the CAR's official Sangho language) militias, first organized by the deposed president as village-level, anti-Séléka forces in the northwestern CAR, have emerged as major combatants in the communal fighting that is ravaging the country (AFP, January 2). A significant number of anti-balaka fighters report that they joined their militias out of a desire to protect themselves and their families from Séléka, which they associate with the rule of Djotodia. Djotodia's removal from power was one of the key and consistent demands of the anti-balaka militias (Jeune Afrique [Paris], December 21, 2013). The announcement of Djotodia's abdication from power was reported to have been met with widespread celebration in areas of Bangui where anti-Séléka and anti-balaka militias are believed to have the strongest social base (BFMTV [Paris], January 12).

Rural areas in the northwest CAR are reported to be suffering from intense violence between Séléka forces bolstered by Chadians and anti-balaka militiamen. Violence has been the worst in the rural regions in the vicinity of the large towns of Bossemptele, Baoro and Bozoum, where Christians and Muslims are neighbors (PANA [Dakar], January 28).

Currently, a 3,700-strong African Union-led peacekeeping force, Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique sous conduite africaine (MISCA – International Support Mission to the Central African Republic) supplements a 1,600-soldier French expeditionary force as part of the French military's "Operation Sangaris." The French and MISCA forces are primarily deployed in and around the capital of Bangui and are expected to be supplemented by a 500-soldier European Union peacekeeping force, whose mandate was approved by the United Nations on January 28 (Reuters, January 31).

Complicating the mission for French and African Union peacekeepers in the CAR, the local, community-based nature of anti-balaka militias, organized on an ad hoc basis to attack Muslims suspected of being members of or sympathetic to Séléka, frequently makes it difficult for the peacekeepers to determine which members of the community are anti-balaka or guilty of attacks against Muslims (*Le Parisien*, December 18, 2013). French peacekeepers based in Bangui are also reportedly viewed with suspicion by Muslim residents, and are accused of being a biased military force that is ignoring or assisting anti-balaka militiamen in attacks against the city's Muslim community (Anadolu Agency [Ankara], December 18, 2013). Similarly, Christian residents of Bangui who are sympathetic to the anti-balaka, claim that Chadian peacekeepers provide support, including weapons, to remnants of the Séléka militias in the capital (Reuters, December 26, 2013).

Chadian residents of Bangui, a large number of whom are descended from families who have lived in the city for over half a century, have been the targets of attacks by anti-balaka militia fighters, leading to an estimated 20,000 Chadians leaving the CAR for Chad (IRIN, January 9). Figures released by the Chadian Embassy in Bangui indicate that 57 Chadian residents have been killed in the city since March 2013, and 10 Chadian soldiers deployed with MISCA were killed in fighting with anti-balaka militias in December 2013 (France 24, January 7). Violence directed against Muslim residents in Bangui by anti-balaka fighters is also reported to target Senegalese, Malian, Cameroonian and Nigerian Muslims, forcing many of these foreign nationals to leave the CAR, depleting one of the primary social groups responsible for the important livestock and trade sectors of the CAR's economy (IRIN, January 9; France 24, January 7).

Anti-balaka militias are particularly concentrated in the mixed sectarian northwestern region of the CAR, and in the capital of Bangui, where the anti-balaka fighting groups consist of rural migrants who fled communal violence in the northwest and sought the removal of Djotodia from power (*Liberation* [Paris], December 25, 2013). The majority of the anti-balaka are Christian fighters, although it is not clear whether the anti-balaka identify primarily as a "Christian" force. There are also believed to be a significant number of animist fighters in the various anti-balaka militias that have been raised in the northwestern CAR and in Bangui (Agenzia Fides [Rome], January 27).

The Bangui neighborhood of Boeing (near the international airport) is reported to be a stronghold of anti-balaka militias, with one anti-balaka group in the neighborhood claiming to have 15,000 fighters (Reuters, January 16; AP, December 15). Boeing is near a major French military camp for Operation Sangaris and has absorbed an estimated 100,000 displaced people.

Anti-balaka fighters are reported to be a mix of local militiamen and former CAR soldiers of the Forces Armées Centra-africaines (FACA – Central African Armed Forces) who were supporters of former president Bozize (AP, December 15, 2013; al-Jazeera [Doha], December 5, 2013). Currently, anti-balaka militias are believed to have varying levels of organization, with some of the fighting groups receiving military training from former FACA soldiers (ITTELE [Paris], December 16, 2013).

The anti-balaka militias in the CAR represent a complicated challenge for peacekeepers as the country moves towards a political transition from the rule of Djotodia. Anti-balaka militias do not appear to have a centralized leadership structure, and anti-balaka fighters are driven as much by a desire for revenge against Séléka and its sympathizers for the group's attacks against civilian communities, as by disagreements over political power. Rising communal tensions, a worsening humanitarian crisis and uncertainty over the ability of international peacekeepers to prevent more widespread violence amongst the country's combatants, particularly in the rural northwest of the country, are taking on a sectarian overtone. If this sectarian combat in the CAR continues, it could draw other regional actors, such as militant Salafist groups tied to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Nigeria's Boko Haram and Ansaru groups, into a war over control of the country's abundant natural resources – including oil, uranium, diamonds and gold – that could fund militant Salafist insurgencies throughout the African continent.

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Notes

1. "CAR: AU Must Deploy Remaining Peacekeepers to Protect Civilians from Imminent Attack," Amnesty International, January 28, 2014, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/central-african-republic-au-must-deploy-remaining-peacekeepers-protect-civilians-imminent-attack>.

2. "I Can Still Smell the Dead: The Forgotten Human Rights in the Central African Republic," Human Rights Watch, September 18, 2013, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/car0913_ForUploadWInsert.pdf.

Islamist North Caucasus Rebels Training a New Generation of Fighters in Syria

Murad Batal al-Shishani

As Syria's bloody conflict enters its fourth year in March, it continues to provide a battlefield that attracts jihadists from all over the world. North Caucasians, including Chechens, are no exception. Previously, many reports alleged that Chechens were present in jihadi battlefields in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places; however, these claims were never proved. Syria is the first place where Chechen jihadists are indisputably taking part in fighting outside the North Caucasus.

Chechens and other Caucasians in Syria operate in four major groups, each of which is commanded by one of four prominent Chechen leaders: Omar al-Shishani, Saifullah al-Shishani, Amir Muslim and Salahudeen al-Shishani (the mujahideen announced the death of the latter via Twitter on February 6). These commanders are not related but all use al-Shishani (Arabic – "the Chechen") as a surname.

Divisions and Unifications

Omar al-Shishani, born Tarkhan Batirashvili, comes from the remote Pankisi Gorge in northeast Georgia, populated by ethnic Chechens who emigrated from their homeland in the 19th century. Before making his way to jihad, Omar served in the Georgian military in the disputed republic of Abkhazia between 2006 and 2007. He later signed a contract in 2008 to join the Georgian army as a rifleman, but this

came to an end when he was dismissed due to tuberculosis. In September 2010, he was arrested for the illegal purchase and storage of arms.

According to his own account, Omar began thinking of jihad even before he was released from prison due to his health in 2010 and left for Egypt immediately after his release. [1] When the Syrian crisis escalated, Omar entered Syria from Turkey. Inside Syria, Omar served as the leader of Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa'l-Ansar (JMA - the Army of Migrants and Supporters) before being appointed as the leader of the northern sector of the formerly al-Qaeda associated Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (for the JMA, see Terrorism Monitor, April 19, 2013).

When the Syrian civil war began, another Chechen commander, Saifullah al-Shishani, was already living in Turkey after leaving the Pankisi Gorge due to family disputes. He joined the JMA under Omar al-Shishani's leadership, but later defected in September 2013 to form his own group. Controlling a small group of several dozen fighters, Saifullah announced he was joining Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaeda-affiliated group) in late December, 2013. [2]

In November 2013, most of the Chechen fighters in Syria left Omar al-Shishani's command for a "restructured" JMA under the leadership of another Chechen from Pankisi; Salahudeen al-Shishani, who was widely regarded as the representative of Doku Umarov's Islamic Caucasus Emirate (ICE), assigned by Umarov to facilitate the unification of Caucasian fighters in Syria. [3]

Most Chechen fighters left Omar al-Shishani because they refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or because they had already pledged allegiance to Umarov. Others did not want to be affiliated with a group that is considered extremist, even by jihadist standards.

The fourth prominent Chechen leader in Syria is Amir Muslim, who is also from Pankisi but left the valley while still a child. He is a veteran of both Chechen wars, who was arrested by Russian authorities in 2008 but, surprisingly, released a short time later. [4] His group is Jund al-Sham, which operates independently in Latakia governorate.

Structure of the Caucasus Jihadi Units

The majority of Chechen fighters in Syria (estimates of their numbers range from 400 to 1000) are former students who were studying in Syria and Egypt before the upheavals of the Arab Spring and later played a major role in attracting others to come. [5]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many students left the North Caucasus to study Arabic and Shari'a in the Middle East. For the students, it was a means of re-discovering their Islamic identity. This movement persists until the present, exposing these students to a variety of Islamic ideologies in the Middle East, including Salafist-Jihadism.

Other Chechen fighters in Syria have arrived from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, a movement that has several causes:

- An increasing inclination towards Salafism in the younger generation;
- The near impossibility of crossing the mined and guarded northern borders to join the ICE's jihad against Russia;
- The geographical proximity of Turkey, the gateway for foreign fighters traveling to Syria, and;
- The relative ease of travel as Georgian citizens.

Another source of recruitment is young Chechens from the European Union, part of the Chechen refugee community of some 150,000 to 250,000 people. Syria represents an opportunity to honor Islam for Chechens who cannot return to their homeland, where the pro-Russian government of Ramzan Kadyrov pursues all those tied to the Chechen independence movement. Most Chechens in the EU fall into that category. [6]

The last group consists of those few Chechens who were able to successfully pass the intense scrutiny of the intelligence agencies inside Chechnya and were able to travel to Syria. Only a few cases in this category have been reported. [7]

Training and Organizing Chechen Volunteers in Syria

When a Chechen fighter arrives in Syria to join large militias such as the JMA, he goes through various phases of training and preparation. Newcomers hand over their documents to the amir and then enroll in military training for 30 to 45 days unless they are jihad veterans with one year's experience or military veterans with professional military training. There are also restrictions on the newcomers' mobility – "during the first four months they are not allowed to travel outside Syria. Only after this period can a person leave for personal or family reasons... During the fighter's presence in Syria the group allocates him money and food." [8]

These phases reflect how Chechens in Syria aim to establish coherent groups, but also demonstrate that they are looking to Syria as a preparation ground for their own protracted conflict with Russia back home. A source close to Chechen fighters in Syria, who requested anonymity, said that

Caucasian fighters are getting training in Syria. This is especially important because they have had limited success establishing training camps in the North Caucasus due to government resistance and a lack of resources. [9]

Indeed, ICE leader Doku Umarov had expressed his reservations concerning young Caucasians flocking to Syria. [10] Though he is in Syria himself, even Salahudeen al-Shishani stated in a message to his fellow fighters in the Caucasus that "without good reason, people from the areas where jihad is on-going such as... our Caucasus should not flock to Syria."

While acknowledging that jihad is "easier in the Levant," Salahudeen said "it's better to wage jihad in the Caucasus, where Moscow and the Russian infidels fought us for centuries." Salahudeen also expanded on the priority that must be given to the jihad back home, urging his fellow fighters to "be prepared for the so-called 'Sochi Olympics' This is a clear and direct order from our Amir, Doku Abu Uthman [i.e. Doku Umarov]." [11]

It seems that Umarov eventually realized, or had to accept, the importance of Syria as a training ground for Caucasian fighters, revising his views in a video in which he admitted to diverting young fighters to Syria due to a lack of resources in the North Caucasus. [12]

Conclusion

A source close to Chechen fighters in Syria stated that some Caucasians have returned to the North Caucasus already. This would mean that they have finished their required four months of training and that the ICE is now benefitting from the Caucasian presence in Syria. [13]

The impact of the Syrian crisis will not be limited by its borders. The conflict is attracting foreign fighters from various parts of the world, providing militants with training and ideology. With fighters from across the North Caucasus joining the Syrian jihad, the impact of their return will be felt across the entire region.

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Notes

1. "Interview with Omar Shishani," Sena al-Sham (a jihadist paper released in Syria), October 10, 2013, <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?t=31592>.

2. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPiaYXAoNVM&feature=youtu_gdata_player.
3. Salahudeen announced the new structure on November 15, 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2NgNi_m9z0.
4. A high quality video biography of Amir Muslim was available in several languages on YouTube, but all materials relating to Amir Muslim or his group were removed when the YouTube account was recently terminated: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLR7x0Jxvw8>, accessed November 5, 2013.
5. Interview with a local Imam in the Pankisi Gorge, October 2013.
6. For examples of young Chechens from the EU joined jihad in Syria, see: <http://the-war-diaries.com/?p=3399> and <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/deutsche-im-syrischen-buergerkrieg-mein-mann-ist-ein-schahid-1.1644758>.
7. See: http://echokavkaz.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/blog-post_19.html?m=1.
8. Interview with Salahudeen Shishani published on Kavkaz Center, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2013/08/25/18201.shtml>.
9. Author's interview with a source close to Chechen fighters inside Syria via a social media medium, August 7, 2013.
10. See Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Caucasus Emirate Reverses Position on Syrian Jihad," North Caucasus Weekly, June 28, 2013, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41093&no_cache=1#.UvDVA3n0sxJ.
11. See: <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/arab/content/2013/07/31/9072.shtml>.
12. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXxOi8rfDrA>.
13. Author's interview with a source close to Chechen fighters inside Syria via social media, August 7, 2013.