IN THIS ISSUE:

UN Special Envoy to Libya Bernardino Leon and General National Congress member Muhammad Mageb at UN peace talks.

The JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

HOUTHIS OPEN DOOR TO GREATER IRANIAN ROLE

James Brandon

Internal sectarian and political divisions have continued to deepen in Yemen in recent weeks, creating fresh instability and uncertainty. This was highlighted by President Abd Rabbo Mansur Hadi's decision to relocate his government from the capital Sana'a to the southern port city of Aden, after fleeing Sana'a where he had been held under house arrest by the Houthi Shi'a rebel group, which now controls the capital and northern, upland parts of the country. Hadi reportedly said that Aden had become "Yemen's capital" due to his move (al-Jazeera, March 7). This was followed by GCC governments transferring their embassies to Aden, in a show of support for Hadi, with Qatar and Saudi Arabia moving their embassies on February 25, and Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE following two days later (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 27; al-Arabiya, February 28; Bahrain News Agency, February 28). The United States and United Kingdom have meanwhile moved some their remaining diplomats in the country to Aden, although they have not formally relocated their embassies, which remain closed in Sana'a. The UK additionally replaced their former ambassador, Jane Marriot, who was widely seen as inexperienced and occasionally tactless, with Edmund Fitton-Brown, a veteran Arabist who has nearly 20 years of experience in the Arab world and who enjoys extensive contacts in the Gulf (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, February 23). The effect of these moves has been to demonstrate a united GCC, U.S. and UK front against the Houthis, in support of Hadi.

In Sana'a, the Houthis have responded to these moves to isolate them with a series of gestures, apparently intended to demonstrate both their hold on northern Yemen, their self-sufficiency and their deepening links to Iran. Most notably, on March 1, the first scheduled direct Iran-Yemen airline flight since the 1980s took place, with an Iranian Mahan Air aircraft landing at Sana'a, allegedly carrying what the Iranian Red Crescent described as "12 tons of medical devices and medicines" (Saba New Agency, March 1). This followed an agreement between the Houthis and Iran to operate up to 12 direct

flights per week between the two countries and to allow Iranian "cooperation" in a range of aviation-related fields, such as airport operations and runway maintenance (Saba News Agency, February 28). This agreement seems intended to allow Iran to provide the Houthis with both a door to the outside world and also a source of technical expertise. In addition, the Houthis held military drills near the Saudi border on March 12, involving infantry, jeeps and artillery. Although a Houthi spokesman said that the actions were not intended to "pose a threat to anyone," they were presumably intended as a warning to Saudi Arabia against intervening against the movement (Press TV, March 12). It is worth noting, however, that the Houthis' isolation is less complete than it may appear in Western and GCC capitals. China, India and Russia all maintain their diplomatic presences in Sana'a, and China—a key investor in the country—in particular enjoys deep and long-standing connections with Yemen dating to the 1950s.

On the surface, the effect of these moves is to highlight, and perhaps accelerate, the Houthis' drift towards the Iranian camp on one hand, and the GCC's determination to prevent a viable Shi'a-dominated government taking root in the Arabian Peninsula on the other. At the same time, however, Hadi's move to Aden, and his overt backing by the GCC, is unlikely to be universally welcomed locally; despite an infusion of Wahhabism into Aden during the past two decades, a significant section of Adenis (who mostly subscribe to the Shafi'i school of Islam), remain staunchly secular and/or inclined to Sufism. Many consequently regard Gulf-sponsored Salafism as an unwelcome foreign import, threatening the city's traditionally more tolerant and open culture. In addition, representatives of the southern separatist movement, al-Hirak, have criticized the relocation of government bodies to Aden, characterizing this as importing northern Yemen's problems to the south, no doubt fearing that the president's relocation will hinder their own aspirations (Anadolu Agency, March 6). Meanwhile, Hadi's "Popular Committees" militia has begun a de facto purge of potentially anti-Hadi southerners in Aden, for instance forcibly removing Abd al-Hafez Muhammad al-Saqqaf, a well-known member of a distinguished southern family, as the commander of the Special Security Forces in Aden (Yemen Times, March 11). Al-Saqqaf's removal triggered brief but intense violence in the city on March 19 (al-Jazeera, March 19). To the likely further consternation of the Aden separatists, Hadi (who is himself from southern Yemen) is also backed by al-Islah, the Yemeni wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has refused to talk part in talks with the Houthis without Hadi (Yemen Times, March 11). Islah, which has long opposed southern separatism, itself remains engaged in a war of words with the Houthis, whose leader recently described Islah as pursuing a "dirty, negative, unethical, non-Islamic" strategy and alleged

that there is "clear and open alliance between Islah and al-Qaeda" (al-Manar, February 26).

One risk posed by these developments is that the deliberate isolation of the Shi'a Houthis by the mainly Sunni GCC, with the support of Western nations, will accelerate the Houthis drift towards Iran and stoke Sunni-Shi'a political sectarianism that has largely been unknown in Yemenis, as shown the March 20 attacks on Zaydi mosques in Sana'a (Reuters, March 20). Such a development would potentially make any long term accommodation between the Houthis and GCC-backed factions harder to reach, as well as laying the groundwork for more overtly sectarian conflicts in the future. That said, the recent history of Yemen shows that apparently durable alliances are liable to collapse rapidly and that yesterday's enemies can quickly become today's friends; consequently a face-saving rapprochement between the Houthis and Hadi, and even between the Houthis and their arch-enemies Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Islah, cannot be ruled out. Such a deal would potentially restore a measure of calm to the country, at least in the short term.

MALI ATTACK HIGHLIGHTS CONTINUING JIHADIST THREAT

James Brandon

A lone Islamist attacker killed four people—two Malians, one French and one Belgian citizen—in a gun and grenade attack on a bar in Mali's capital Bamako on the evening of March 7, before being killed himself by the security services. The attack was later claimed by the al-Murabitun jihadist movement via audio message. The recording said that the attack had been carried out to "avenge our Prophet" who had been "insulted and mocked" (Maliweb.net, March 9). The message also said the attack had been carried out in revenge for killing Ahmed al-Tilemsi, a founding member of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), who was killed in Mali in December 2014 during a battle with French special forces. Al-Tilemsi had also been an important member of al-Murabitun, which was itself formed by a 2013 merger between MUJWA and a smaller Salafi-Jihadist group run by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran Algerian militant (RFI, December 11, 2014). The attack was the first fatal terrorist event in Bamako in several years, underlining the continuing jihadist presence in the country. However, the audio message also claimed a failed January assassination attempt against General Mohamed Ould Meydou, a senior ethnic Arab officer in the Malian Army, whose perpetrators were previously unknown. A suspected accomplice of the

attacker was killed in a Malian special forces raid in the following week (Maliweb.net, March 16).

The attack potentially indicates that ethnic Tuareg and Arab Islamist insurgents, who are mainly confined to sparsely-inhabited northern Mali, may be seeking to bring the conflict to the capital. In addition, the nature of the attack, conducted against civilian targets associated with foreign interests, is strongly reminiscent of tactics by other Islamist militant groups worldwide, and potentially suggests that the group is shifting away from insurgency-style, mainly-rural operations toward conducting more terrorist attacks in urban areas. This shooting attack also comes soon after preliminary peace talks between the Malian government and representatives of various Arab and Tuareg armed rebel groups in Algeria. These talks ended positively in early March, with the Malian government signing the deal on March 1, and representatives of the main separatist rebel groups, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad—MNLA) and the Arab Movement for Azawad (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad—MAA), promising to return to northern Mali to consult their grassroots supporters before signing it themselves (Algerie Presse Service, March 1). The Bamako attack, coming just days after this progress, may have been intended by al-Murabitun to signal their opposition to the proposed agreement and their determination to continue fighting. Since then, the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad—CMA), an umbrella group of different rebel organizations, rejected the current version of the proposed accord on March 16, although they said that it offered a basis for further negotiations (Maliweb.net, March 17).

At the same time, however, hit-and-run guerrilla attacks have continued in the north. Most notably, a UN base in the northern city of Kidal was struck by around 30 rockets, killing two local civilians and one Chadian soldier (Maliweb.net, March 8). No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack. Meanwhile, ethnic tensions remain a key driver of the continuing violence in the region, underscoring how the conflict in northern Mali has polarized communities that had previously lived in relative harmony. For instance, in one recent bout of violence, two innocent ethnic-Arab teenagers were attacked, disemboweled and then burnt alive by locals in the aftermath of a suspected militant grenade attack on a nearby police station in the northern city of Gao (Maliweb.net, March 11; France24, March 10). The developments underscore that even if the main Malian northern rebel groups do reach an agreement with the government, northern Mali is likely to remain unstable for some time to come.

The Islamic State Threat in Central Asia: Reality or Spin?

Ryskeldi Satke, Casey Michel and Sertaç Canalp Korkmaz

The threat of Islamist radicalism in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia has been a topic of debate among the analyst community for many years, especially following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. In recent months, interest in the topic has surged again, in part because Russia and Central Asian governments have publicly warned of the possible spillover from the ongoing instability from Afghanistan, combined with reports of Central Asians joining the Islamic State organization in Iraq and Syria (RFE/RL, December 11, 2014). Opinions over the extent of this threat vary, however; for instance, human rights organizations have cautioned that regional government's renewed focus on the Islamist threat comes as human rights in Central Asia deteriorate (Human Rights Watch, January 29). Others, however, have argued that the Islamic State organization represents a genuine "potential direct threat to Russia" and other regional states (al-Jazeera, December 1). The aim of this article is to assess the threat posed by Islamist militancy in the Central Asian region, with particular reference to the Islamic State.

Islamic State Fighters

The number of fighters from Central Asia who are taking part in the Syrian conflict are disputed. Some domestic analysts in Central Asia estimate that the total number of the Central Asian radicals in the ranks of the Islamic State is less than 1,200 (Radiotochka.kz, September 16, 2014). However, some international institutions suggest that the number of recruits from the region is higher, between 2,000-4,000, with every Central Asian state supplying fighters to the Islamic State's ranks (International Crisis Group, January 20). These numbers partly reflect differing estimates for the total number of Islamic State fighters. For instance, Russian military intelligence has reportedly estimated the overall number of Islamic State fighters at close to 70,000, while the U.S. intelligence community reportedly believes that 20,000-31,000 fighters is more accurate (Sputnik, December 10, 2014; NBC News, February 28). Underlining the potential allure of the group, however, a trio of Central Asian nationals were arrested in New York in 2014, reportedly attempting to join the organization (*Wall Street Journal*, February 28). In addition to Central Asian recruits, there are volunteers from Russia; in February, Russian Federal Security Service (Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti—FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said that close to 1,700 Russian nationals are fighting in Iraq (RIA Novosti, February 20). Some reports have indicated that

fighters from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the largest Central Asian ethnic groups in the Islamic State as opposed to recruits from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, with some observers also reporting that many Central Asian recruits join the Islamic State via North Caucasus based jihadist networks while working as a seasonal laborers in Russia (Afghan Analysts Network, October 8, 2014).

Like most other jihadists, Central Asian volunteers regard Turkey as the best way to reach Syria, largely due to its convenient geographical location and liberal visa policies. Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also said that the country's visa free regime with Turkey has allowed Kazakh nationals to reach Syria through refugee camps on the Turkish-Syrian border (Tenguiz News, October 22, 2013). Turkey's long border with Syria also makes the travelling process easier, which has led to much international criticism of the Turkish government in recent months (BuzzFeed, January 30). Ankara has responded by ratcheting up its international cooperation on multiple levels to better prevent foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from travelling through Turkish territory. Turkish security institutions have also created a "no-entry list" of potential FTFs, which includes possible Islamic State recruits from Russia and from the former Soviet states of Central Asia. Turkey has also established "Risk Analysis Groups" at the country's entry points to "identify potential FTFs at borders, ports and airports." [1] The Ankara-based Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) reported that, as of February 2015, Turkey's no-entry list database contained 9,915 globally known names of potential Islamic State fighters. Out of this number, 21 percent are from Russia and Central Asia. ORSAM's comparative analysis of London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) think tank's report on the total number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria concluded that Turkey's cooperation on security issues with Central Asian republics remains effective, particularly as compared to engagement on the same subjects between Central Asian states and the European Union (ICSR, January 26).

Exaggerated Threat?

Officials in both Russia and Central Asia sometimes describe the Islamic State's potential impact in the region in a way that goes far beyond the current likely direct threat. Russian officials and the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) repeatedly have made alarmist comments about Islamist and Islamic State infiltration into Central Asia. For instance, CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha has said that there is an "attempt to create some sort of underground extremist state" in the region (Trend,

September 22, 2014). Meanwhile, Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Russian Institute for Middle East Studies, has claimed that Central Asian states will only stanch the flow of thousands of fighters to Syria when the governments enact "absolute control of religious life" (Registan, October 6, 2014). Some in the United State have also played up fears of Islamic State influence in the region. For example, when donating 300 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles to Uzbekistan—the largest single military donation the United States has ever bestowed on a state in the region—Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central Asia Dan Rosenblum cited "counter-terrorism" efforts, while the CENTCOM-sponsored publication Central Asia Online claimed in February that 900 Uzbeks have already been killed while fighting for the Islamic State, a remarkably high number (*New Republic*, February 3; Central Asia Online, March 11).

Many claims that the Islamic State presents some form of existential threat to the region appear overblown. Professor Murat Çemrek, director of International Relations Department at Turkey's University of Necmettin Erbakan said:

> 'Moderate Islam' does not make sense for the young generations in Central Asia since they do want to show their religiosity in the public life. And the older generations, having survived long enough under the atheist and anti-theist Soviet period, are not interested in any kind of Islam, neither moderate nor radical. [2]

If correct, this potentially creates an environment that is not suitable to large scale Islamist radicalization. Indeed, a recent Chatham House research paper argues that claims of large scale radicalization in Central Asia are based on a "little or no evidence" (Chatham House, November 11, 2014). On the other hand, despite the uneven quality of Central Asian justice system, some convictions for Syrian-related militancy have taken place. For instance, Kazakhstan has already sentenced two people taking part in the Syrian conflict (RFL/RL, February 20; Time.kz, March 28).

In addition, the threat from the Islamic State has allowed regional authorities to restrict both civil, political and media rights further. For instance, after a video emerged detailing Kazakh citizens within Islamic State ranks, the Kyrgyz government in December restricted access to a local news outlet, the Kloop.kg website, which had reported on the story (RFE/RL, December 16, 2014). Kazakhstan recently followed suit, blocking Radio Free Europe websites in response to a separate Islamic State video (RFE/RL, March 5). Media and civil rights in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

are already among the most restricted in the world, and government repression has continued apace in response to the Islamic State threat. Tajikistan, meanwhile, has managed to conflate the purported Islamic State threat to the region with the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the primary opposition party. This conflation helped eliminate IRPT's electoral chances in a recent parliamentary election, allowing the government further leverage to further undermine the IRPT, leaving it without a single seat for the first time in 15 years (RFE/RL, March 4). In the context of the ongoing broader economic downturn in Russia and Central Asia, caused by Western sanctions and falling oil prices—which is set to most heavily impact Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—the Islamic State threat has given regimes the excuse to tighten their domestic security provisions, at a time when they have growing reason to fear economic-related unrest.

Conclusion

At present, the threat from Islamist extremism in Central Asia appears significantly more modest than is painted by both regional governments and the Russian authorities. In addition, the Afghan Taliban seems disinclined to ally in any significant way with the Islamic State, which seems likely to limit the group's influence there. Thomas Ruttig, co-director and senior analyst of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), explained:

> So far, there have been only fringe Afghan groups that have declared allegiance with the Islamic State. The battlefield is still controlled by the Taliban, who are not interested in competition there and have moved, in a number of incidents, against such groups. In this context, the danger of a destabilization of Central Asia by the Islamic State from Afghanistan is overstated in the current situation, even alarmist and very likely serves domestic agendas. [3]

Therefore, despite the significant number of Central Asians active in the Islamic State, Russian and Central Asian government claims that the Taliban and Islamic State-linked radicals will soon overrun the republics of Central Asia appear largely unfounded.

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Notes

1. "International Cooperation against Foreign Terrorist Fighters: The Experience of Turkey," ORSAM, February 2015, http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/2015219_policybrief22ing.pdf.
2. Interview with Professor Murat Çemrek via email, March 9, 2015.
3. Thomas Ruttig commentary via e-mail, February 26, 2015.

Islamic State Develops New Strategies to Destabilize the KRG

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

In recent months, the Islamic State militant group has started using ethnic Kurdish militants in operations against the security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and in its propaganda materials. Some Kurdish Islamic State militants have taken part in videoed killings. For instance, on January 26, Kurdish Islamist State militant Mofaq Asa'ad Askander was filmed beheading a captured Kurdish Peshmerga soldier in Mosul, shocking Iraqi Kurds (MEMRI, January 26). The presence of such Kurds in the Islamic State raises important questions: Could the Islamic State use these Kurds to conduct attacks inside the usually safe Kurdistan region, or to target Western troops presently training the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in the KRG capital Erbil? Despite a few attacks, the answer appears to be no.

Local and Diaspora Recruits

According to Hemin Hawrami, a senior official in the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), around 300 to 350 young Iraqi Kurds have so far joined the Islamic State. [1] Other sources estimate around 500 joined the Islamic State in 2014 (Rudaw, February 27). Some recruits are students of former radical members from the Islamist movement in the Kurdistan region that developed in the 1980s while others had been involved in more recent militant groups. For instance, Mofaq Askander and his two brothers, Younis and Musa, were former Mosul-based operatives of al-Qaeda in Iraq and joined the Islamic State when it took the city in June (Rudaw, February 5). Another source of recruits are ethnic Kurds who became radicalized in the West, such as the 18-year-old ethnic Iraqi Kurd Muhammad Hadi, from the UK, who travelled to join the Islamic State in early 2014 (*Daily Mail*, June 29, 2014). So far, Kurds who have joined the Islamic State appear to have come mainly from inside Iraq, rather than from Kurdish populations in Turkey, Syria and Iran.

Militant Operations

Thus far, there have been a few significant attacks inside Kurdistan attributed to the Islamic State. On August 23, 2014, a bomb attached to a car wounded four people on the Erbil-Kirkuk road (Rudaw, August 23, 2014). The year before, on September 29, 2013, there was an attack against the Security Directorate in Erbil (KRG.org, September 30, 2013). However, it is surprising that with a more than 1,000

kilometer frontline between Kurdistan and Arab-areas of Iraq, the Islamic State has not carried out more attacks in the KRG, using Kurdish radicals who can move with relative ease across the border. Nevertheless, there is the continuing potential for the Islamic State to use its Kurdish recruits' knowledge of the local terrain and cultural-social knowledge in conducting suicide operations within Kurdistan. The Islamic State has also used Kurds in more conventional military operations on the fringes of Kurdish regions in Syria and Iraq, including in the Syrian town of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab in Arabic), where Kurdish Islamic State fighters were even led by a Kurdish commander known as Abu Khattab al-Kurdi, as well as in the Mosul area and Kirkuk (Vice, November 7, 2014).

One reason for the Islamic State's lack of attacks in the KRG is the work of the Kurdish security service, the Asayish. Despite of the huge influx of displaced persons and the Asayish themselves fighting on the frontlines, there has not been an appreciable security vacuum for the Islamic State to exploit. Moreover, the Asayish has stepped up their monitoring of potential militants, and has arrested several Islamic State-supporters and sleeper cells. For instance, in January, the Asayish arrested six pro-Islamic State clerics in several locations, and has reportedly even deported some Kurdish families, who are from north of Erbil, after their two sons joined the Islamic State (Rudaw, February 27; Duhok Post, February 16). However, it is unclear how many suspected Islamic State militants and supporters have been arrested in total in Kurdistan.

Moreover, the local awareness of Kurdish citizens to this potential threat has increased. It is difficult today for Kurdish radicals to even express sympathy with the Islamic State, since most locals would immediately report such suspicious behavior to the Asayish. Indeed, before the August attacks, there were some Kurds expressing sympathy for the Islamic State publicly. Now this seems to be impossible, and many conservative Islamists in Kurdistan have tried to distance themselves from the Islamic State since its expansion last year. Other radicals have preemptively left the region; one pro-Islamic State Kurdish preacher, Mullah Shwan al-Kurdi, reportedly joined the group in November, possibly fearing arrest by the Asayish (Rudaw, November 27).

Social Media Propaganda

Aside from direct military attacks, however, the Islamic State has in recent months also increased its use of Kurds in media propaganda operations aimed against the Kurdistan region. For instance, the group has published footage of the radical Kurdish preacher, Mullah Shwan al-Kurdi, taking

part in operations against the Peshmerga on the outskirts of Kirkuk on January 31, in which he promised that the group would capture Erbil (Bas News, January 31). Al-Kurdi was also featured in an Islamic State propaganda video released in February showing captured Kurdish Peshmerga fighters dressed in orange jumpsuits in a cage. [2]

The Islamic State also appears to have increased their social media messages in Kurdish in order to spread fear among the Kurdish population and to counter Kurdish media criticism of the group. These messages have also tried to show that the Islamic State is not against Kurdish Muslims, only secular Kurdish parties. For instance, one Islamic State statement published in January said that the Peshmerga are not fighting on behalf of religion, and that they have ties to Israel, United States and Iran: "They want to create Kurdistan as an independent state, with the help of the Jewish state and spread of democracy… They openly say that they don't believe that state and religion should be united." [3] This online recruitment effort by the Islamic State was one reason why the KRG temporarily shut down Twitter and Facebook access in the region in August 2014 (Middle East Eye, August 10, 2014).

PSYOPs vs Kurdish Clerics

In response, the KRG has used religious leaders to counter Islamic State propaganda, and help to discourage potential recruits (War is Boring, February 9). In response, the Islamic State has threatened Muslim Kurdish leaders with death for declaring that slain Peshmerga are "martyrs." However, according to a Kurdish senior advisor Abdulsalam Medeni, the Islamic State's propaganda has found some resonance locally: "Some mullahs in the mosques during the Friday prayers send this message directly or indirectly… The grassroots Muslims think our government is not respecting Islamic traditions." [4] Likewise, in March, in the Kurdish town of Bardarash, two Kurds were arrested for vandalizing a Peshmerga grave, writing on it "no God but Allah" (Bas News, March 12).

Nevertheless, the number of Kurds joining the Islamic State has decreased since the militant group attacked the Kurdistan region (Rudaw, February 27). While many Kurdish Islamists sympathized with the struggle against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 (which they viewed as a war between al-Assad and Muslims), they generally do not sympathize with the internal fights between jihadist groups, or with jihadist attacks on Kurds in Syria and Iraq. In addition, the allure of the Islamic State has diminished as the group has been increasingly pushed onto the defensive in 2015.

Conclusion

The impact of the Islamic State's several hundred Kurdish members has, so far, been less than might be expected. The group has not been able to use these Kurds to take over Kurdish dominated areas, or to wage regular attacks inside Kurdistan. Indeed, with Western support, the Kurdish government has managed to maintain internal security, and security conditions have improved overall in Kurdistan since the Kurds managed to take back most Kurdish areas in Iraq from the Islamic State after August 2014. Meanwhile, the number of Kurdish recruits to the Islamic State has decreased due to effective Asayish actions, the security awareness of local citizens and because of the jihadist movement's decreasing popularity among Islamist Kurds. In addition, the Kurdish government has effectively responded to the Islamic State's propaganda attacks on its secular government. Despite this, however, a considerable number of Kurds remain active with the Islamic State in areas controlled by the group, and a limited risk of attacks by Kurdish radicals will therefore remain for the foreseeable future.

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Notes

1. Hemin Hawrami speech, "Kurdistan in Transition– Political reconfiguration in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) and South Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan) in the wake of IS military setbacks," Utrecht University, February 28, 2015.
2. Islamic State, "Healing the heart of the believers," February 21, 2015, https://archive.org/details/ISIS. peshmerga.kirkuk.
3 Aseer Sunni al-Kurdi, "Peshmerga, a group full of hatred and unbelief," January 3, 2015, http://justpaste.it/iqdx.
4. Author interview with Abdulsalam Medeni, a senior advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister of the Kurdistan region, March 13, 2015.

The Ongoing Unrest in Libya and the Hyped Threat Posed by Islamic State

Dario Cristiani

Making sense of the political turmoil and the potential threat of the Islamic State in Libya is becoming increasingly difficult. At the beginning of March 2015, delegations from various Libyan factions met in the Moroccan coastal town of Skhirat, to negotiate under the auspices of the United Nations. At the same time, leaders of Libyan political parties and activists met in Algeria in a further attempt to ease dialogue between warring Libyan groups. The main declared aim of the negotiations in Morocco, which are ongoing, is to achieve a unity government and a lasting ceasefire. However, on March 13, the delegation representing the Tobruk-based government, the only one recognized by the international community, did not show up, after requesting that the talks be postponed for one week after the Tripoli-based government, which is backed by the forces of the Libyan Dawn, asked the UN clarify its official position on the role of General Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Tripoli-based government's armed forces (Reuters, March 13; Jeune Afrique, March 9; Libya Herald, March 11; Libya Akhbar, March 13; Terrorism Monitor, December 19, 2014). These developments, as well as the lack of any ceasefires or notable agreements between the warring parties to date, illustrate the challenges involved in bringing peace to Libya, not least because key individuals, such as Haftar are also potentially stumbling blocks to any deal, especially now that he has been appointed commander of the Libyan Army (al-Jazeera, March 9; al-Sharq al-Awsat, December 18, 2014). The aim of this article is to provide some background to the ongoing conflict and to contextualize the roles, aims and make up of the various parties.

Local Obsessions: A Geographical and Psychological Explanation for the Current Fragmentation

The current conflict is largely shaped by a constant element in Libyan history: local communities have a strong sense of identity, which influences their perceptions, interests and choices. This is presently true for Misrata, Zintan and many other locations. Historically, this was due to geographical constraints that made communication and contacts complex, as well as diverse cultural influences (Levantine culture in the east, Berber and Maghrebi influences in the west and Saharian and Sahelian links in the south) that produced social units, such as a town or tribe, with their own specific interests, agendas and preferences. The different parts of this rather complex mosaic have traditionally united only when they all faced a common threat, such as against the Ottomans, the Italians and, most recently, against *Muammar* Qaddafi, the Libyan leader from 1969 to 2011. However, as there is no common existential threat now facing these groups, they have reverted back to pursuing their own narrow local agendas by force, and at the expense of other Libyan groups.

As a result, while there is presently a macro division of the country between the Tripoli- and Tobruk-based governments, in reality both broad camps are nothing more than very loose coalitions of disparate interests, which are mostly local. The primacy of local interests over other elements (such as ethnic and tribal allegiances or ideological affinities) is shown by the existence of strange alliances within both camps. For instance, Haftar, who portrays himself abroad as the ultimate defense against radical Islamism in Libya, has Salafist allies such as Ashraf al-Mayar, a hardline preacher who was formerly involved with the February 17 Martyrs Brigade, an Islamic militia. Similarly, the Misratan militias, who are generally opposed to Qaddafi's former allies, have allied themselves with the Tuaregs in the south, who were key to Qaddafi's regime (Libya Herald, June 11, 2014, Daily Star [Beirut], January 8).

However, while this "hyper-localism" is partly the result of geography and history, it is also the result of the extremely powerful fear of exclusion from power, which developed under Qaddafi's 42 years of ruling. All the different fragments of the current Libyan political landscape perceive the current violence (likely correctly) as the constitutive phase of a new order, and they do not want to be excluded from it for fear that this would potentially condemn them to decades of being excluded from power. Therefore, while many of these groups' interests are local, at the same time, they do not want to be excluded at the national level; hence the coalition of disparate groups into unlikely national-level coalitions. This is even more important at the present time because the Libyan oil sector, virtually the country's only source of wealth, is under pressure owing to two dynamics: the new strategy of economic warfare against oil installations by regionally-linked terrorist groups and a potentially long-term trend of lower oil prices (Terrorism Monitor, April 4, 2014).

The Emergence of Islamic State in Libya

In this fragmented political landscape, in which two competing power centers are incapable of controlling the entire country, it is not surprising that the Islamic State has become an actor inside Libya. The Islamic State first emerged in Libya in mid-2014, when Libyan fighters returned from Syria and Iraq to fight, jointly with foreign fighters that the

Islamic State had sent to organize its Libyan branch, and to collect pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State leader in Iraq and Syria, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 16, 2014; al-Hayat, November 3, 2014). By October 2014, the Islamic State had declared eastern Libya a province of its caliphate (ANSA, October 31, 2014). Subsequently, in the first months of 2015, the group significantly raised its profile through a number of armed actions that were amplified immensely because of the tremendous media capacity of the central branch of Islamic State. This quickly made the Islamic State appear to be an important element in the Libyan conflict. Most notably, the group claimed responsibility for an attack against a police station in Tripoli while it also reportedly attacked an oil plant in al-Ghani, kidnapping 9 foreigners on March 9 (Libya Herald, March 12). Other actions by the group included the videotaped beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christian workers in February 2015, and the attack against Tripoli's Corinthia Hotel at the end of January 2015 (Jeune Afrique, March 9; Dabiq, February 12; al-Ahram, February 15). However, apart from focusing attention on the group and encouraging many foreign companies to scale back their operations in Libya, these sporadic and highly-focused attacks, often carried out against relatively weak targets, have had relatively little impact on the dynamics of the broader conflict in the country.

Although the Islamic State's current influence on Libya's broader strategic picture is, therefore, relatively minimal, the rise of the group, amplified by its high-profile attacks, has become a key focus of both domestic and foreign actors. For instance, the Tobruk government's foreign affairs minister, Mohamed Dayri, warned that Libya may turn into a new Syria should political solutions fail, stressing the point that—more than an external intervention—what they need is military equipment to enable them to fight the jihadists (La Tribune [Algiers], February 26). Haftar meanwhile, in an interview with the Italian news agency ANSA, called on Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to ask the international community to lift the current embargo on weapons. Haftar argued that he and his militias were effectively fighting for the benefit of foreign countries, warning that "if we were to fail, the next target of terrorists would be Italy" (ANSA, March 10).

Despite such rhetoric, however, the Islamic State's presence in Libya is not a game changer in and of itself. The group's capabilities are not significantly greater than those of other militias, nor does its presence change the scale of the current military confrontations within the country. Indeed, there is a strange convergence of interests in exaggerating the group's capacities. For Haftar, exaggerating the Islamic State threat represents a valuable rhetoric opportunity to build his profile

as the "Libyan al-Sisi," strengthening his demand that foreign countries support him in order to prevent the Islamic State establishing a presence on the shores of the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Libyan Dawn, the main Tripoli-based militia alliance, has used the rise of the Islamic State to imply the presence of murky external plots and "false flag" operations in the country, or to claim that—as happened in Iraq with former Baathist members—Qaddafi's former loyalists actually represent the bulk of the Islamic State presence (The Independent, March 16). While neither of these claims is entirely groundless, they are inaccurate and exaggerated versions of reality. In the meantime, the Islamic State gains advantages from this by boosting its appeal and expanding its recruiting abilities. In this context, for the Islamic State, success nurtures success; by being perceived as successful, it attracts more recruits, which in turns allows it to be perceived as successful.

Obstacles to Islamic State Expansion in Libya

The Islamic State's membership in Libya is complex. So far, it has been able to attract young militants from Derna and other areas in the east (al-Jazeera, March 7). It has also been able to capitalize on the problems that Ansar al-Shari'a has faced recently, which has led to Ansar al-Shari'a in Derna (which is different from the bigger Ansar al-Shari'a in Benghazi) merging with the Islamic State. The group also contains a mixture of foreign fighters, mainly Tunisians and Yemenis, some of whom are apparently operating there as points of contacts with the central branch in Iraq and Syria. It also contains Libyan fighters returning home (part of the al-Battar Brigade) after a decade or more of militancy between Iraq and Syria. In addition, there are young Libyans from a number of different places, attracted by the Islamic State brand and its apparent success. There are also potentially former Qaddafi loyalists who see the organization as a chance to regain a role and elements of power (Al-Monitor, March 15; al-Arabiya, March 18; International Business Times, February 20; al-Jazeera, March 7).

However, a key element that allowed the Islamic State to emerge successfully in Syria and Iraq is missing in Libya, namely a large and disenfranchised Sunni community, which in Syria and Iraq had been excluded from the current balances of power and who wished to regain the power and influence that they felt was rightfully theirs. This dynamic is missing in Libya, where Sunnis form the vast majority of the population and where divisions are on political, local or tribal lines rather than religious ones. As such, the Islamic State may need to try harder to maintain and justify its presence in Libya, and the final result will likely be different from Iraq and Syria, where they have established a proto-

state. In addition, while winning the support of the Sunni communities in Syria and Iraq has allowed the Islamic State there to access established oil and other smuggling networks from Iraq to the wider region, in Libya, the trade in people and drug smuggling is dominated by Sahelians, Saharian and other Maghrebis.

Conclusion

Despite the existence of two main recognizable and distinct political blocs, based in Tripoli and Tobruk, the Libyan landscape remains significantly fragmented beyond this. Every group has its own political agenda based largely on seizing and preserving local and narrow interests, while also acting nationally in order to avoid being excluded from an eventual new order in Libya. While the current talks in Morocco and Algeria represent a positive step, it is unlikely that they will produce any greater stability in the short-term because the two blocs continue to have a rather intransigent approach, and, most importantly, those few people within each of them pushing for an agreement cannot guarantee that their loose coalitions will accept the outcomes of these negotiations. The presence of the Islamic State is also unlikely to be a strategic game changer for the dynamics of the Libya conflict, due to local circumstances that are unfavorable to its expansion at the moment. However, the fluidity of the strategic environment leaves the door open for some tactical alliances between local groups and the Islamic State, especially if the latter should consolidate its presence in some strongholds in Eastern Libya and being perceived as an actor that can help other groups to achieve their aims.

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