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Fax: (202) 483-8337

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GARISSA UNIVERSITY ATTACKS HIGHLIGHT AL-SHABAAB’S RESILIENCY

Kathryn Basinsky

The Garissa University attacks have demonstrated al-Shabaab’s resiliency despite growing evidence that international efforts against al-Shabaab have been paying off. In the past year, the group lost a significant amount of territory in Somalia over the past year, and a number of senior leaders were killed; the most recent of whom, Adan Garaar, the alleged ringleader of the September 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Kenya, was killed in a U.S. drone strike on March 13 in southern Somalia (*The Standard* [Nairobi], March 12). In addition, there have been a series of defections, and Kenyan security forces disrupted one of the group’s recruiting networks in that country. The militant group is still a force to be reckoned with, however. The siege of Garissa University in Kenya on April 2 continued a trend of high-profile and deadly attacks within Kenya, and on Kenya Christians in particular, indicating that as safe havens in Somalia have been eliminated, the group is shifting their focus to new targets and territories.

Al-Shabaab has increasingly focused their attacks within Kenya. The April 2 attack on Garissa University College, in which militants laid siege to the college campus for hours until their defeat by security forces, is the latest example. An estimated 147 people were killed, making this the deadliest al-Shabaab attack yet (*Reuters*, April 2). Earlier this year, al-Shabaab launchers a cross-border raid from Somalia when they locked several people inside a shop and set it on fire, killing at least four (*Horseed Media*, March 18). This raid occurred in Wajir, roughly 100 kilometers (60 miles) from the Somali-Kenyan border. The ability of militants to cross this far into Kenya comes as the country considers building a security wall along its border with Somalia in order to halt these types of cross-border incursions (*The Standard*, March 23). In another notable development,

which underlines the group's continuing attraction to some Islamist radicals, multiple Kenyan women have been arrested at the border for trying to marry al-Shabaab militants (*The Standard* [Nairobi], March 31). The latest three women arrested were well-educated and from middle-class families, upending the narrative that the Kenyans who join the group are poorer and uneducated. The arrests also provide a clear point of comparison with women joining the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, who are often from similar related privileged backgrounds.

Meanwhile, in Uganda, Joan Kagezi, the lead prosecutor in the ongoing trial of 13 men accused of terrorism, murder and membership in a terrorist organization, was killed on March 30 by two men who shot her while she was commuting home from work (*The Standard* [Nairobi], March 31). This comes shortly after the U.S. Embassy in Kampala warned of a potential terrorist attack. The 13 accused are on trial in connection with the 2010 World Cup bombings in Kampala, al-Shabaab's first major attack outside of Somalia. 74 people were killed in these attacks when suicide bombers detonated at viewing parties at an Ethiopian restaurant and a rugby club during the final match (*al-Jazeera*, July 13, 2010).

In Somalia, itself, al-Shabaab's fortunes have been mixed. On March 27, al-Shabaab attacked the Maka al-Mukarramah Hotel in Mogadishu, first with a suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), which was followed by additional militants storming the building. Eighteen people were killed, including Yusuf Mohamed Ismail (a.k.a. Bari-Bari), Somalia's ambassador to Switzerland and Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva (*AllAfrica*, March 30). Some of those killed were initially taken as hostages, but were then beheaded (*Garowe Online*, March 28). This additional level of brutality is strongly reminiscent of the Islamic State's approach to killing hostages in Syria and Iraq. In contrast to this display of power in the heart of the capital, however, two days later, a key al-Shabaab member, Mohamed Ali Hassan, surrendered to Somalia government troops in Bakool, in southwestern Somalia. Hassan was a key member of al-Shabaab's highly effective intelligence wing, Amniyat, and was responsible for a number of suicide bombings (*Garowe Online*, March 30). His defection will certainly reduce al-Shabaab's operational capacity in Bakool both as a result of the group losing his expertise and in terms of intelligence that he reveals to the Somali government.

These developments indicate that, despite the loss of a substantial amount of territory and the deaths of key leaders, al-Shabaab is still capable of conducting deadly attacks across the Horn of Africa region. Indeed, the group has proven itself able to bounce back before, having alternated between

controlling substantial amounts of Somalia and controlling very little territory since the fall of the Islamic Courts Union, its predecessor, in 2006 (*Terrorism Monitor*, January 23). Assassinations and suicide attacks are likely to be al-Shabaab's lifeline until the group is either eliminated or retakes territory.

INDONESIAN ARRESTS UNDERLINE INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC STATE

James Brandon

A series of arrests of Indonesians, both in Indonesia and abroad, during the last month have thrown fresh light on the Islamic State's influence over the country's small community of radicals. On March 21, Indonesian security forces arrested six individuals in the Kebayoran Baru, Bekasi and South Tangerang areas of the capital Jakarta, on suspicion of involvement in recruiting individuals to the Islamic State (*Jakarta Globe*, March 22). A few days later, on March 25, three Islamic State veterans were arrested in Malang in East Java. The authorities said that they had associated in Syria with Abu Jandal al-Indonesia, an prominent Indonesian Islamic State member who recently issued threats against the country's military in a Bahasa-language YouTube video (*Jakarta Post*, March 27). Although investigations are ongoing, at least one of the arrested men had reportedly claimed that he left the Islamic State after it didn't deliver on various promises given to him by recruiters. While related details are sparse, this may reflect the Islamic State's habit of using non-Arab recruits for menial tasks or as suicide attackers. Meanwhile, in a further indication of the range of international jihadist links recently emerging in Indonesia, the government's Financial Transactions Report and Analysis Center has also recently raised concerns over money flowing from radical Islamists in Australia into Indonesia, which has in turn prompted closer cooperation between the respective governments (*Jakarta Globe*, March 25). On March 18, the Indonesian police said they suspected a small non-fatal bombing that occurred in a Jakarta shopping mall in February, was potentially carried out by Islamic State supporters, partly because the bomb was chlorine-based, a hallmark of Islamic State operations (*Tempo*, March 20). If true, this indicates that Islamic State veterans may already be seeking to carry out attacks in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, in further evidence of the Islamic State's ability to attract Indonesian radicals, the Turkish foreign ministry said on March 11 that 16 Indonesians had been arrested in January while seeking to cross into Syria (*al-Jazeera*, March

14). They were detained in the town of Gaziantep, an important transit point located to the north of the Syrian city of Aleppo. A foreign ministry spokesman said the group, which included four women, one man and 11 children, were taking a route “usually used by jihadists” (*ARA News*, March 12). Responding to the arrests, Indonesian Security Minister Tedjo Edhy Purdijatno said: “We are still investigating... but it is clear that they wanted to join [the Islamic State] to have a better life in accordance with Islamic Shari’a laws” (*Hurriyet Daily News*, March 13). The group reportedly sold all their Indonesian assets prior to departing for Turkey, suggesting they aimed to permanently relocate to Islamic State-held territories (*AsiaOne*, March 18). In addition, 16 other Indonesians also went missing in Turkey in early March, after disappearing from their tour group shortly after arriving in Istanbul, likely with the intention of making their way to Syria, according to Indonesia’s foreign minister (*Jakarta Globe*, March 13; *Jakarta Post*, March 11). Around 500 Indonesians are believed to have so far joined the Islamic State, although how many of these have been killed or have returned home is not known (*Jakarta Globe*, March 26).

These developments underline that while Indonesia has made much progress in the last decade in tackling militancy, the Islamic State has the potential to attract small numbers of radicals to travel to Syria, some of whom may seek to conduct attacks upon their return. Although Indonesian security forces are well aware of this potential threat (as demonstrated by the recent arrests), the country’s response is partly constrained by its relatively liberal legal framework. In particular, Indonesia has no law that prohibits individuals from fighting in foreign conflicts, or that can prevent suspected radicals from travelling; although officials have publicly mooted some steps to monitor individuals acting suspiciously, for instance pilgrims buying one-way tickets to the Middle East or who have sold all their possessions before travelling (*Jakarta Post*, March 27). Although the number of Indonesians physically fighting with the Islamic State is almost statistically insignificant—a few hundred from a population of more than 250 million—the recent arrests and the apparent attempted bombing indicate that their presence may nonetheless have longer-term implications for Indonesia.

‘Wilayat Khurasan’: Islamic State Consolidates Position in AfPak Region

Animesh Roul

Amid a series of government denials from Pakistan and Afghanistan regarding the presence of the Islamic State militant group in these countries and its ongoing outreach activities there, its expansion was corroborated by none other than the Islamic State’s spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, on January 26, 2015 (*The Nation* [Lahore] September 5, 2014; *Dawn* [Karachi], November 11, 2014; *Pajhwok*, February 5). Al-Adnani, who is believed to be in Iraq or Syria, formally announced the establishment of Wilayat Khurasan (literally Khurasan Province, hereafter IS Khurasan), a reference to a historical region broadly centering on Afghanistan and Pakistan. This claim was made, in an audio statement entitled “Say, ‘Die In Your Rage,’” which was released by al-Furqan media foundation, one of the Islamic State’s media arms. [1] He also endorsed a former Taliban commander, Hafiz Saeed Khan, as its governor (*wali*) in the same speech. Khan had previously pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State, along with a network of other disgruntled Taliban commanders and foot soldiers.

Previously, on January 10, in an indication of their growing extremism, Khan and his followers had released a video pledging allegiance to IS which also featured the beheading of a captive Pakistani soldier (*Dunya News TV* [Lahore] January 12). This was considered to be the Islamic State’s first violent action against the Pakistani state. Since then, two senior commanders of IS Khurasan have been killed in NATO-led actions in Afghanistan. The first to be eliminated, on February 9 in the Kajaki district of Afghanistan’s Helmand Province, was Abdul Rauf Khadim, the “deputy governor” of Khorasan (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], February 10). Khadim had previously rejected the Afghan Taliban movement under Mullah Omar for being too moderate and had preached Salafism in Afghanistan. A few weeks later, his successor, Hafiz Wahidi, was killed by Afghan national security forces in Helmand, along with nine other fellow Islamic State militants (*Khaama Press*, March 16).

In response to these setbacks, IS Khurasan’s *shura* (leadership council), for now dominated by Pakistani Taliban members, quickly issued threats to avenge Khadim, eulogizing the slain leader. The 12-minute long homage video, released by “Khurasan Media” on March 17, featured a statement from Hafiz Saeed Khan entitled “Departure of Shaykh Khadim

and Revenge is Coming” [2] Sooner afterwards, on March 20, a deadly VBIED (vehicle borne improvised explosive device) attack on a Shi’a mosque in Karachi killed at least two people and left many injured. The attack was reportedly claimed by IS Khurasan. [3]

Afghanistan: Islamic Emirate vs. Caliphate

These developments suggest that the Islamic State has found a conducive social and political environment in which to gain a foothold in the AfPak region, where several Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked Islamist groups, both violent and non-violent, already have similar sectarian and caliphate-centric worldviews. Underlining this, before his death in February’s drone strike, Khadim was reportedly actively engaged in recruiting Afghan fighters for the Islamic State, mostly in the country’s Helmand region (*IBTimes*, January 14). This recruitment drive and open campaigning for IS apparently led to direct confrontations with the followers of local Taliban warlord Abdul Rahim Akhund, a supporter of Mullah Omar’s self-declared “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” At one point, as a result of these tensions, Khadim was even briefly apprehended for his pro-Islamic State activities along with his 45 followers by supporters of Mullah Omar (*Afghan Zariza*, February 1).

In addition, Islamic State flags have been seen hoisted in Afghanistan’s Ghazni and Nimroz provinces, following which large numbers of Taliban fighters reportedly switched allegiance from Mullah Omar to al-Baghdadi (*Khaama Press*, February 1). *Dabiq*, the official Islamic State publication, further listed a number of alleged strongholds of support, including Nuristan, Kunar, Kandahar, Khost, Paktia, Paktika, Ghazni, Wardak, Kunduz, Logar and Nangarhar. [4] Furthermore, in January, information about an Islamic State training center in Afghanistan’s Farah province raised speculation about increasing Islamic State activities there (*Pajhwok*, January 14). Furthermore, other armed confrontations between the Islamic State and the Taliban underscores the increasing clout of IS Khurasan, especially in Charakh in Logar province where IS Khurasan militants killed Abdul Ghani, a senior Taliban commander loyal to Mullah Omar, and wounded his three associates in February (*Pajhwok*, February 2).

That Islamic State influence is quickly gaining ground in Afghanistan, the current seat of famed Taliban Emirate led by Mullah Omar, is not necessarily surprising. For instance, al-Baghdadi’s public questioning of the spiritual and political credibility of the Taliban’s supreme leader, and description of him as “fool” and “illiterate warlord,” has certainly found some resonance in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where

the Taliban and al-Qaeda have not been able to decisively consolidate their position after decades of struggle (*Khaama Press*, January 29).

Footprints in Pakistan

Before its existence was formally announced, IS Khurasan’s presence was felt across Pakistan in the form of occasional unfurling of the black flag, graffiti on the walls supporting the Caliphate and the appearance of Islamic State stickers, mostly in Karachi, Lahore and the Punjab city of Taxila in late 2014 (*Dawn* [Karachi], November 13, 2014; *Dawn* [Karachi], November 30, 2014). At around the same time, the provincial government of Balochistan uncovered massive Islamic State recruitment drives in Hangu district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in the Kurram tribal agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It also reportedly discovered secret official communications between long-established Pakistani militant Salafist groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Ahl-e-Sunnat wal Jamat (ASWJ) and the Islamic State, which showed the groups planning attacks on military installations and government buildings in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and on the region’s Shi’a minority (*Dawn* [Karachi], November 8, 2014). In addition, this January, the Pakistani security services arrested Yousaf al-Salafi, a Syrian of Pakistani origin, and his local associate Hafiz Tayyab in Lahore for allegedly recruiting youths and sending them abroad for jihad. Al-Salafi was reportedly involved in an Islamic State recruitment campaign and was charging the group about \$600 for every person he recruited (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], January 28).

In addition, leaflets and propaganda materials in support of the Islamic State have been distributed in several parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and South Waziristan. There have also been verbal endorsements from pro-Taliban clerics like Maulana Abdul Aziz, chief of Islamabad’s Red Mosque (Lal Masjid), which was the epicenter of anti-government violence in July 2007. However, the most brazen support came from women students and teachers of the Jamia-e-Hafsa madrassa, which is part of the Red Mosque and led by the principal of the seminary, Umme Hassan, who is Abdul Aziz’s wife (*Kashmir Observer*, December 8, 2014; *Express Tribune* [Karachi], December 14, 2014). The students of Jamia-e-Hafsa offered an oath of fealty to al-Baghdadi in late November of last year, and invited al-Baghdadi to “avenge” the 2007 Pakistan army raid and loss of life at the then-besieged Red Mosque. However, Umme Hassan maintained that they still considered Mullah Omar of the Afghan Taliban as their supreme leader. It should be noted that the Lal Masjid has been at the forefront in supporting al-Qaeda and Taliban causes in the region for over a decade.

These developments suggest that similar oaths of allegiance from sectarian militant groups like Ansar ul-Khilafa wal Jihad (formerly, Tehrik-e-Khilafat Jihad) and Jundullah in support of the Islamic State and al-Baghdadi have made it relatively easy for the Islamic State to find traction and a foothold in Pakistan. These militant groups also remain active. For instance, in January, Ansar ul-Khilafa wal Jihad claimed responsibility for killing security personnel in Karachi, Multan and Hyderabad (*ARY News*, January 22). Jundullah meanwhile claimed responsibility for targeting Shi'a mosques across the country, including the deadly Shikarpur imambargah blast on January 30 (*Dawn* [Karachi], January 31). This indicates that it would likely be relatively easy for the Islamic State members working with these groups to begin conducting attacks of their own in Pakistan. Unsurprisingly, as with Afghanistan, *Dabiq*, has claimed that the Islamic State has influence in a number of places in Pakistan, including in Peshawar, Swat, Marwat, Kuki Khel, Tor Dara, Dir, Hangu, Bajaur, Orakzai, Kurram and Waziristan, although some of these claims should probably be seen as propaganda. [5]

Outlook

The Islamic State's formation of "Wilayat Khurasan" and its endorsement by the organization's central leadership reveals at least two changing aspects of militant Islamism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Firstly, it shows militants rejecting al-Qaeda and Taliban, and secondly, for the first time in decades, it involves militants clearly rejecting Mullah Omar himself, the spiritual leader of most of the Deobandi-inspired militant groups in the region, and even openly challenging of him over his (alleged) lack of authority and lack of visible achievements in comparison to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in the Middle East region. On the other hand, the emergence of IS Khurasan, combined with Pakistan's ongoing anti-militant Operation Zarb-e-Azb, have encouraged fragmented Taliban units to unite once again under the Pakistani Taliban's umbrella group, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This was evidenced in mid-March when the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan Jamaat ul-Ahrar (TTP-JA), a powerful splinter group of TTP, and independent militant group Tehrik-e-Lashkar-e-Islam (TLeI), led by Mangal Bagh, called for a united Taliban conglomerate to fight the Pakistani state, including the army and the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence. [6] Even though such a scenario seems distant at present, these anti-state objectives, which are partly shared by both the IS Khurasan and TTP groups, suggest a potential merging point between these two powerful jihadist movements in due course.

Animesh Roul is the Executive Director of Research at the New Delhi-based Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict (SSPC).

Notes

1. The full text (English Translation) of the Adnani Statement, released by al-Hayat Media Center, another Islamic State-linked jihadist media outlet, can be found here, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/01/26/audio-statement-by-is-spokesman-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami-say-die-in-your-rage/>.
2. The video "The Departure of Shaykh Khadim, and Revenge is Coming," which is in Pashto, can be found here: https://archive.org/details/KhadimPashto_201503.
3. Author's communication with an Islamabad-based journalist. Also see IS Khurasan's statement on the March 20 Mosque attack (in Urdu), <https://www.mnbr.info/vb/showthread.php?t=85734>.
4. "Dabiq: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy," No. 7, p.34.
5. *Ibid.*
6. See the group's press release, "TTP-JA: Unity of Mujahideen of Pakistan," <http://worldanalysis.net/14/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ttpja.png>.

GATIA: A Profile of Northern Mali's Pro-Government Tuareg and Arab Militia

Andrew McGregor

A little more than a year after a French and African Union military intervention drove an Islamist coalition from their bases in northern Mali in early 2013, Prime Minister Moussa Mara ignited the seething tensions in the area with an ill-advised visit to the Kidal region (a stronghold of separatist Tuareg rebels) in mid-May 2014. Within days, the Malian Army was in full flight from angered Tuareg insurgents in Kidal and many other sites of strategic importance in the north, including towns along the main drug-trafficking and smuggling routes that connect northern Mali to the northern Sahara and the Mediterranean coast.

As a result of the army's rapid flight, a significant portion of the Tuareg and Arab communities of the north that have no interest in separatism or the formation of an Islamic state were suddenly once more at risk from politically-motivated violence. These communities responded by transforming their pro-government Tuareg militia into a more inclusive pro-government self-defense organization, the Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA), led by the only Tuareg member of Mali's general staff, General Hajj ag Gamou. With an estimated 1,000 fighters drawn from Tuareg and Arab communities, the movement announced its formation on August 14, 2014. Since then the group has emerged as a powerful obstacle to the ambitions of those militant groups in northern Mali seeking greater autonomy or the establishment of an independent state to be known as "Azawad."

Formation and Aims

According to GATIA's secretary-general, Fahad ag Almahmoud, the movement was formed after the May 2014 withdrawal of the Malian Army from its positions east and north of Gao rendered the Tuareg and Arab communities "defenseless" (*Le Monde*, February 9). Failing to obtain the support of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali—MINUSMA) or French military forces (which the movement suspects of supporting the Tuareg separatists of the Mouvement National pour la libération de l'Azawad [MNLA]), GATIA's founders observed that only armed groups were being given a seat at the peace negotiations that followed: "There was no mission to substitute ourselves for

the army or [government] assistance, we just have the same enemy. In reality, when we took up arms, the Malian Army no longer existed [in northern Mali]" (*Le Monde*, February 9, 2015; RFI, August 16, 2014).

The establishment of GATIA, however, is not just a response to growing insecurity in the absence of government security forces. It is, in many ways, also the result of a long-simmering conflict between the noble Tuareg clans of Kel Ifoghas (a.k.a. Kel Adagh) and the Tuareg vassal clans known as Imghad. The introduction of democracy after independence in 1960 allowed the more-numerous vassal classes of Tuareg and Arab society to accrue authority as elected officials over the less numerous noble groups. For many in the non-noble classes, Malian citizenship also offered a chance to restructure traditional Tuareg and Arab society in their favor, while the noble castes objected to these developments and their own sudden political subordination to the Bambara ethnic majority in southern Mali.

The rivalry between nobles and vassals was intensified by struggles over smuggling routes, after a new outbreak of rebellion in northern Mali led by separatist Tuareg vassal clans in January 2012 and the military coup three months later that ended Bamako's authority over the north. When the Islamist coalition occupied northern Mali, the noble Ifoghas group tended to favor Iyad ag Ghali's Islamist Ansar al-Din movement, while the vassal Imghad (particularly the Tuareg militia led by Hajj ag Gamou) sided with the state. Ag Ghali of the Ifoghas is a bitter enemy of Imghad General Ag Gamou, and is now believed to be in the uncontrolled region of southwestern Libya while preserving his influence in northern Mali through intimidation and alleged death squads which target his opponents in the Tuareg community (*Jeune Afrique*, February 18).

Evolving Alliances

The French and African Union military intervention in 2013 shattered the Islamist coalition in northern Mali (which included the Movement for Unity and Justice in West Africa [MUJWA] and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM] as well as Ansar al-Din), leading many Ifoghas to abandon Ansar al-Din to form a new and less overtly provocative movement, Le Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (HCUA). With Mali's regular army still absent from the north, there have been calls from Mali's press and political establishment for Ag Gamou's GATIA to be formally integrated into the Malian Army (*Nouvelle Libération* [Bamako], October 24, 2014).

After the flight of the Malian Army from the north, GATIA joined Songhai fighters of the Coordination des Mouvements

et Front Patriotique de Résistance (CM-FPR, incorporating the largely Songhai Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso militias) and the loyalist faction of the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA). These took part in a successful battle against a coalition of rebels (HCUA, MNLA and the anti-Bamako faction of the MAA) led by veteran commander Hassane Fagaga at Anéfis on July 11, 2014. [1] Both the MNLA and GATIA use Malian fighters who returned from Libya after the defeat of the Qaddafi regime. One of these, Baye “Bojan,” was an important military commander in GATIA before his death in the battle for Anéfis.

The military weakness of the MNLA (exposed earlier when the movement was sidelined by Islamist militants in 2012) resurfaced in October 2014 when GATIA drove the MNLA from its base in the town of In Tillit (south of Gao) and several other smaller settlements (*L'Indépendant* [Bamako], October 20, 2014; *Jeune Afrique*, October 17, 2014). GATIA insists that the MNLA is deeply involved in drug trafficking, though in reality there are few armed groups in northern Mali that have not benefitted in some fashion from the lucrative drug corridors that run from West African ports through Mali to points north and east.

General Didier Dacko of the Malian Army in October 2014 denied reports that government forces had provided support to the GATIA attack, adding that “the militia does not act under the orders of the Malian Army” (Sahelien.com, October 16, 2014). Mali’s Ministry of Defense has also described suggestions that GATIA was formed from members of Ag Gamou’s militia (an important part of the reconquest of northern Mali in 2013) and elements of a Malian Army technical weapons group as “part of a pure disinformation campaign aimed at discrediting the Malian Army” (*Jeune Afrique*, February 16). Government denials that it is assisting GATIA may be a means of promoting GATIA as an independent (but Bamako-friendly) partner in the Algiers peace talks, which currently exclude GATIA. This is because if GATIA is too closely identified with the government through a formal relationship with the government there would be little reason for them to be part of the negotiations. The leader of GATIA, General Ag Gamou, continues to report to the Malian general staff, but GATIA Secretary-General Ag Almahoud insists that GATIA members receive no pay from Bamako: “Nobody pays us. We do it for honor, not for the unity of Mali” (*Jeune Afrique*, February 17).

GATIA’s goals remain only vaguely outlined; when asked directly what proposals GATIA intended to present at the peace talks, Ag Almahoud preferred to describe what GATIA did not stand for: “We are not part of the movements that have

taken up arms against the state. We do not demand secession from Mali, nor federalism, nor autonomy” (*JournalduMali.com*, October 21, 2014). What is clear is that GATIA sees a future for northern Mali within a sovereign and secular Malian state. Less certain is what all this loyalty will cost, keeping in mind Ag Gamou’s apparent political ambitions.

Outlook

The flight of Malian troops from northern Mali in May 2014 confirmed once again that Mali’s military is utterly incapable of controlling the north, convincing Mali’s leaders that the deployment of pro-government ethnic militias is preferable to further misadventures by the Malian Army. While the French have committed to a military presence in the region with the inauguration of Operation Barkhane in July 2014, both separatists and loyalists suspect the French of favoring the other side. [2] The HCUA, MNLA and the anti-Bamako faction of the MAA are likewise all determined to prevent GATIA from having a seat at the peace talks, in part because GATIA’s very existence challenges their claim to be the legitimate voices of northern Mali’s Tuareg and Arab communities. On the other hand, the question is whether any agreement reached in Algiers that excludes GATIA could restore peace and order in northern Mali. The internal struggle within the Tuareg and Arab communities is escalating and a failure to address this in the ongoing negotiations will fail to produce a workable solution to the violence in the north.

Andrew McGregor is Director of Aberfoyle International Security, a Toronto-based agency specializing in security issues related to the Islamic world.

Notes

1. For Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso, see Terrorism Monitor, April 19, 2012, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39290&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=588&no_cache=1; August 10, 2012, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39747&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=588&no_cache=1; and February 21, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41997&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=757&no_cache=1. Both factions of the MAA include many former members of MUJWA.
2. For Operation Barkhane, see Terrorism Monitor Briefs, July 24, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42667&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=757&no_cache=1.

The Struggle for Syria's al-Hasakah Governorate: Kurds, the Islamic State and the IRGC

Nicholas A. Heras

The Islamic State's attack on ethnic Assyrian Christian communities in the northeastern Syrian governorate of al-Hasakah in February and the subsequent kidnapping of approximately 220 Assyrian villagers has brought renewed international attention to the region and the complex ethnic and religious conflicts brewing there (*Daily Star* [Beirut], February 28; *YouTube*, February 23; *al-Arabiya* [Dubai], February 23). In addition, thousands of additional Assyrian villagers are believed to have been displaced from their homes by the fighting and forced to join members of their community in the city of Qamishli, in northeastern al-Hasakah governorate, near the Syrian-Iraqi border, while others fled to Lebanon (*al-Arabiya* [Dubai], March 5; *al-Jazeera* [Doha], February 28). An ethnically and religiously diverse region, al-Hasakah is emerging as a major focus of the country's ongoing conflict, complicated by the governorate's diversity, and the competition for power between a Kurdish-run autonomous regional government dominated by *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* (PYD—Democratic Union Party) that is in turn strongly influenced by the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK—Kurdistan Workers' Party) and communities loyal to the al-Assad government. The situation in al-Hasakah governorate is further complicated by the presence of Syrian security forces who are bolstered by Hezbollah and Iranian trainers, and Arab-majority armed opposition groups loyal to the Islamic State and other factions (*YouTube*, December 3, 2014). [1]

Al-Hasakah governorate is an important battle space that influences the regional conflict against the Islamic State, as it is through al-Hasakah that the Islamic State connects its holdings in Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq. The province has broader significance to the region because it is the core territory in the autonomous, Syrian Kurdish-run administration that links Rojava (western Kurdistan) to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, with a potential long-term effect on the course of regional, transnational Kurdish nationalism. For the al-Assad government and its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) patron, parts of al-Hasakah are its strongest remaining footholds in eastern Syria, providing a base of operations against the Islamic State and to fight back against the development of an independent or autonomous Kurdish-run administration in eastern Syria.

The Islamic State and Its Opponents

The Islamic State's recent kidnapping operation focused on 34 Assyrian villages northwest of the governorate's capital al-Hasakah, centered on the town of Tal Tamar along the Khabur River, a tributary of the Euphrates, and located near the front-line between the Islamic State and the Kurdish-majority militia network of the *Yekineyen Parastina Gel* (YPG—People's Protection Units) which are being supported by local, Assyrian-majority militias under the *Suturo* (abbreviated from "Syrian Security Office") organization (*Daily Star* [Beirut], March 3; *YouTube*, February 27; *YouTube*, February 26; *YouTube*, February 23). The *Suturo* militias were formally organized in January 2013 under the command of the local Syrian Military Council, an ethnic Assyrian armed opposition body which is strongly influenced by the Assyrian ethnic activist organization the Syrian Union Party, after the withdrawal of Syrian military units from the area following clashes with YPG (*ARA News* [Sanliurfa], March 12; *Assyrian International News Agency* [al-Hasakah], February 28). Since then, the *Suturo* militias have fought against Arab-majority armed opposition groups, including militant Salafist organizations that have been powerful in this region such as the Islamic State, the al-Qaeda affiliate *Jabhat al-Nusra* (Victory Front) and *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya* (Islamic Movement of the Free Ones of the Levant), with approximately 1,200 ethnic Assyrian fighters engaged in full-time security duties (*Assyrian International News Agency* [al-Hasakah], February 28; *Orient News* [Dubai], February 7).

Recently, under pressure to secure the release of the remaining Assyrian villagers seized by the Islamic State, the leadership of the Assyrian Church of the East in al-Hasakah stated that it is against the members of its communities forming military alliances with the YPG, stressed that the hostages were civilians and asserted that church properties were forced to display the image of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad due to pressure from the regime's security forces (*ARA News* [Sanliurfa], March 20). This indicates that although Assyrian armed groups are typically aligned with the YPG and are an important component of its local security structure, the continued strength of the Islamic State in al-Hasakah governorate, and its ability to strike directly at Assyrian villages, as well as the increasing regime presence, are forcing vulnerable communities like the Assyrians to pragmatically assert their neutrality.

Ethnic Tensions

A recent YPG offensive was recently launched in early March against Islamic State-controlled villages south of Qamishli,

centered on the large town of Tal Hamis near the Syrian-Iraqi border. This offensive, which is concurrent and separate from a Syrian government-led operation in the same area, is further threatening the Islamic State's control over strategic areas of the governorate that provide it with lines of supply and reinforcement between its territory in Syria and Iraq ([YouTube](#), March 9; [Daily Star](#) [Beirut], March 3; [YouTube](#), February 24). The YPG campaign south of Qamishli is being waged by both Kurdish and Arab fighters, particularly Arab tribal fighters who are organized into the Quwat al-Sanadid (Sanadid Force), which is drawn from local sections of the powerful, transnational Shammar tribal confederation ([YouTube](#), March 1).

Kurdish-Arab relations in the area of Tal Hamis, which had been under Kurdish control until it was seized by the Islamic State, have been strained throughout the Syrian conflict ([Orient News](#) [Dubai], September 30, 2014; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], September 18, 2014). For instance, the Islamic State has effectively used Kurdish-Arab tensions to rally Arab fighters in the area of Tal Hamis to rise up against the YPG. This led to a significant portion of the local Arab population declaring allegiance to the Islamic State ([YouTube](#), February 18, 2014). The area is of strategic importance because of its proximity to the oil fields centered on Rmeilan in the southern Qamishli suburbs. In further evidence of ethnic tensions in the area, in the aftermath of the recent YPG campaign in Tal Hamis, local Arabs were reportedly violently displaced from their homes by Kurds and forced to flee to al-Hasakah city, Qamishli and other areas of the governorate ([al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], March 2). For the three major combatant coalitions in the governorate (the Syrian government and its auxiliaries, the Kurdish-led autonomous government and the Islamic State) securing the cooperation of local Arab tribal groups, which are a significant minority in al-Hasakah governorate, or neutralizing them, is key to securing long-term control over the province. [2]

One effect of the reports of YPG (i.e. Kurdish) violence against Arab villagers in the area around Tal Hamis, even if the YPG was assisted by Arab forces, is to allow the Syrian government to present itself as a pan-ethnic unifying force, contrasting with the Kurdish-led autonomous government in al-Hasakah governorate. This narrative is being built into the newly announced loyalist political movement Jazirah Arabiya Sooria (Syrian Arab Jazirah [peninsula/island]), which is seeking to promote a pluralistic message, if heavily influenced by Ba'ath party principles of pan-Arab nationalism, to mobilize pan-ethnic dissent and action against the against the Kurdish-led administration in the greater northeastern region of Syria which is referred to as "al-Jazirah" ([al-Akhbar](#) [Beirut], March 3; [Syria HR](#) [al-Hasakah], March 2; [Siraj](#)

[Press](#) [Qamishli], November 6, 2014).

This evolving narrative of resistance against the Kurdish-led administration in al-Hasakah is important as the al-Assad regime ramps up its effort to expand its control in the governorate. Core to the Syrian military's recent campaigns in al-Hasakah governorate are ongoing efforts to recruit, train and deploy local loyalist militias, primarily drawn from Sunni Arab tribes ([ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], March 8; [ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], October 5, 2014; [ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], October 31, 2013). Although the national paramilitary organization of the Quwat al-difa al-watani (National Defense Force—NDF) has been important to the al-Assad government's limited security regime in al-Hasakah, a more recent effort has been made to aggressively draw sections of the local Arab tribal population more firmly into the regime's security structure to fight against the Islamic State and Arab-majority armed opposition groups around the governorate's two major cities of al-Hasakah and Qamishli ([ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], March 8; [al-Alam](#) [Tehran], March 5; [Yekti Media](#) [Qamishli], November 26, 2014; [Siraj Press](#) [Qamishli], November 6, 2014; [ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], October 5, 2014; [ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], October 31, 2013).

The local implementer of this effort, reportedly working in collaboration with the Syrian Ba'ath Party's Intelligence Bureau chief Ali Mamluk, is the Qamishli-based Tayy tribal Shaykh Muhammad al-Faris ([Yekti Media](#) [al-Hasakah], January 17; [ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], May 17, 2014; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 2015). These growing, local loyalist militia forces clashed with YPG fighters in the city of al-Hasakah in January, which is believed to have resulted in the displacement of as much as 70 percent of the Kurdish residents of the city ([ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], January 30; [Rudaw](#) [Erbil], January 21; [Yekti Media](#) [al-Hasakah], January 17).

The IRGC-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and Hezbollah trainers have reportedly been working to build the capacity of loyalist militias ([Orient News](#) [Dubai], March 3; [Rudaw](#) [Erbil], March 1; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], February 20; [ARA News](#) [Sanliurfa], October 31, 2014). Further, Syrian opposition activists in Qamishli, reporting to a credible Syrian opposition-sympathetic news agency, allege that the Sham Wings airline company owned by Rami Makhlouf, Bashar al-Assad's first cousin and an important regime figure, has begun direct flights from Najaf, Iraq to Qamishli. The stated purpose of these flights is believed to be the transport and deployment of predominately Iraqi Shi'a fighters organized by the IRGC-QF effectively to the battlespace of northeastern Syria ([Zaman al-Wasl](#) [Qamishli], March, 20).

The increased deployment of IRGC forces in the region would not be surprising; over the course of the Syrian civil war, IRGC-QF organized Shi'a fighters have been increasingly and more numerous deployed as an expeditionary force actively fighting for the regime in several key theaters of the conflict (*Orient News* [Dubai], March 9; *al-Jazeera* [Doha], February 25; *al-Arabiya* [Dubai], February 19; *Syrian Reporter* [Dara'a], February 11; *al-Arabiya* [Dubai], June 9, 2014; *al-Arabiya* [Dubai], December 13, 2013; *YouTube*, November 23, 2013). The IRGC-QF force provides an important source of additional manpower for loyalist forces to conduct attacks and to hold areas that have been cleared of enemy combatants.

Increased IRGC-QF influence over the al-Assad government's security posture in al-Hasakah, especially the deployment of significant numbers of the IRGC-QF's forces, would be considered a serious threat to the dominance of the YPG in many areas of the governorate. [3] It would also be considered a direct threat by the PYD to the viability and existence of the Kurdish-led autonomous government structure that is the most powerful authority in al-Hasakah. [4] The potential stationing of an IRGC-QF expeditionary force and Hezbollah fighters in al-Hasakah over the long term, in coordination with a larger and more aggressive paramilitary force mobilized largely from local, loyalist Sunni Arab tribes, could thus force a widespread armed conflict between the YPG and regime forces. [5]

Outlook

The most likely significant impact of the current Syrian military campaign in al-Hasakah is the potential expansion of the al-Assad regime's authority via local, primarily Sunni Arab tribal paramilitary militias that are supplemented by the training and likely the kinetic operational support of the IRGC-QF's multi-national Shi'a force. The al-Assad government, with the deployment of IRGC-QF forces in al-Hasakah governorate, a secondary or tertiary theater for much of the conflict, is likely attempting to reestablish its predominant position in the governorate, and to sustain that position over the long-term. Pragmatic Sunni Arab tribal leaders, such as those organized by Shaykh Muhammad al-Faris, could join with the IRGC-QF and the Assad regime as a result of calculating that the trend towards greater involvement of Iran will continue, leading eventually to the success of the regime campaign against the Kurds and the Islamic State in al-Hasakah. They may therefore conclude that there is a greater long-term benefit to themselves and their tribesmen on joining the "winning" side sooner rather than later.

A potential return of the regime's predominance in al-Hasakah governorate, rather than the limited authority and patchwork military presence it has wielded over the course of the war, could allow it to limit or completely suppress the Kurdish-led autonomous government in the governorate. With the assistance of Iran and local Arab tribes, the al-Assad government could potentially be in position to dramatically reverse Kurdish social, political and cultural gains in the region.

Meanwhile, YPG militias, which are predominately oriented towards seizing and holding territory that borders Kurdish-majority areas of al-Hasakah governorate, are likely to continue to seek to mobilize more Arabs into their forces. However, they will be hampered by local Arabs' long-standing doubt toward the Kurds' future intentions, fuelled by Syrian government counter-narratives of resistance against the Kurds, specifically over the ideological influence of the PKK on the YPD. The Syrian government could also succeed in mobilizing Arab and non-Arab, ethnic and sectarian minorities such as the Assyrians, Armenians and Circassians, against a Kurdish-led, autonomous region, backed by the threat of a reinvigorated, expanded, and sustained Syrian military presence in al-Hasakah governorate.

The current campaign also presents the Syrian military with the opportunity to move more aggressively to reduce Islamic State control over the overwhelmingly Sunni Arab tribal villages in the southeastern area of al-Hasakah governorate near the Syrian-Iraqi border, particularly those on the Khabur River. If the al-Assad regime can achieve a sustained series of victories on the battlefield in al-Hasakah governorate, which would be won largely by the effort of its local auxiliaries and the IRGC-QF mobilized forces, it could establish a new security reality in the governorate that would have effects beyond reducing the local power of the Kurdish-led autonomous government and the Islamic State. For instance, stronger government control over al-Hasakah governorate, won with the help of the IRGC-QF, geographically expands the influence of the Syrian security forces to a position where it can co-opt local actors, especially Arab tribes, against its opponents.

In addition, positioning regime assets and inserting IRGC-QF forces in northeastern Syria could not only limit the socio-political space for the U.S.-led train-and-equip program for opposition fighters, it would also put direct, regime-led pressure on the Islamic State strategic depth in Syria. In turn, this could position the al-Assad government and its IRGC-QF allies to the international community as essential partners for countering the Islamic State and other militant Salafist organizations, as has happened in Iraq. This would

limit the military and diplomatic options for states currently calling for the removal of the current Syrian government and undermine the hopes of regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and its allies that are seeking to achieve a severe reduction in Iranian influence in the Middle East.

Nicholas A. Heras is a Middle East researcher at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and an associated analyst for The Jamestown Foundation.

Notes

1. For more information about al-Hasakah governorate, see Nicholas A. Heras, "The Battle for Syria's al-Hasakah Province," CTC Sentinel, October 24, 2013, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-battle-for-syrias-al-Hasakah-province>.

2. For more information about the importance of Arab tribal groups in al-Hasakah and their conflicting loyalties, see Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish Enclaves in Syria Battle Islamist Militant Groups," Terrorism Monitor, May 2, 2014, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[swords\]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews\[any_of_the_words\]=Pakistan%20Frontier%20Corps&tx_ttnews\[pointer\]=11&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=42303&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=741933e62cca606c82261295b58de18b#.VRbNRuEe1nA](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[swords]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews[any_of_the_words]=Pakistan%20Frontier%20Corps&tx_ttnews[pointer]=11&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=42303&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=741933e62cca606c82261295b58de18b#.VRbNRuEe1nA); Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish Strategy Towards Ethnically-Mixed Areas in the Syrian Conflict," Terrorism Monitor, December 13, 2013, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=41754&cHash=bbedc896f6cefad8d7284fe2c7fe764#.VRbM9-Ee1nA](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=41754&cHash=bbedc896f6cefad8d7284fe2c7fe764#.VRbM9-Ee1nA); Nicholas A. Heras and Carole A. O'Leary, "The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria," Terrorism Monitor, June 27, 2013, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=41079&no_cache=1#.VRbNueEe1nA](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=41079&no_cache=1#.VRbNueEe1nA); Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "Syrian Tribal Networks and Their Implications for the Syrian Uprising," Terrorism Monitor, June 1, 2012, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39452#.VRbOPOEe1nA](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39452#.VRbOPOEe1nA).

3. Viber interview with an ethnic Kurdish YPG fighter from Qamishli, March 15, 2015; Viber interview with an ethnic Kurdish YPG fighter from the village of Maabadi, near Tal Hamis, March 5, 2015.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*