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IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS 1

A SHORT PROFILE OF IRAQ’S SHI’A MILITIAS
By Zana K. Gulmuhamad 3

IRAN CONFRONTS INTENSIFYING INSURGENT OFFENSIVE IN SISTAN-BALUCHISTAN PROVINCE
By Chris Zambelis 6

AFTER GARISSA: KENYA REVISES ITS SECURITY STRATEGY TO COUNTER AL-SHABAAB’S SHIFTING TACTICS
By Andrew McGregor 8



Mohamed Kuno was the mastermind of the al-Shabaab attack on Garissa University College Attack in Kenya, which killed 147.

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AQAP REBOUNDS IN YEMEN AMID AIRSTRIKES

James Brandon

Early on April 2, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) fighters launched a surprise attack in al-Mukalla, eastern Yemen’s main port and the main city in Hadramawt province. The militants, armed with explosives and RPGs, freed over 200 inmates from the city’s prison, attacked local government and military buildings, looting a large number of weapons, and robbed a bank. They then established checkpoints on roads leading to the city, effectively sealing it off from the rest of the country (*Yemen Times*, April 6). Only two government fatalities were reported, suggesting that most security services had already departed the city or had decided not to fight (*Saba News*, April 2). The following day, AQAP fighters reportedly gave sermons in the city’s mosques (*Yemen Times*, April 6). Following this, AQAP fighters—now reportedly rebranding themselves as the “Sons of Hadramawt”—on April 16 seized Mukalla’s al-Rayan Airport and the nearby al-Shihr oil terminal, reportedly with some cooperation from local, mainly Sunni, tribes (*Mukalla Star*, April 16). The exact situation on the ground remains unclear however.

Meanwhile, in Yemen’s southwestern Abyan province, some AQAP fighters have reportedly sided with forces loyal to the internationally-recognized president, Abdu Rabbu Mansur Hadi, in order to fight the Shi’a Houthi rebel movement, the main target of ongoing Saudi-led airstrikes. “We are fighting along with Hadi’s popular committees as a means to defend our land in Abyan, and because we share a common goal of killing the Houthis and any soldiers loyal to them,” one AQAP leader, was reported as saying (*Yemen Times*, April 8). Separately AQAP, through its @ASNewss Twitter account, claimed responsibility for a suicide car bomb attack on a police station in southern Shabwa governorate and for assassinating a senior security official in the western city



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Hodeidah on April 16 ([MENAFN](#), April 12; [26Sep.net](#), April 16).

These events, evidence of AQAP's growing confidence, are liable to have significant long-term impacts. Many of those released from al-Mukalla prison were imprisoned jihadists, whose presence will bolster the group. These included Khaled Batarfi, a leading AQAP member who had been the head of AQAP operations in Abyan and al-Bayda provinces until his arrest in 2011 ([Saba News](#), March 17, 2011). After his release, Batarfi was photographed in the governor's mansion while standing on a Yemeni flag and making the one-finger "tawhid" gesture popularized by the Islamic State ([Mukalla Star](#), April 13). In addition, the group's seizure of guns and money is likely to increase the group's capabilities further. Meanwhile, AQAP's siding with Hadi's forces in Abyan, a stronghold for various jihadist groups since the early 1990s, vividly indicate that AQAP is actively using Saudi airstrikes to entrench its own influence in that area, apparently aided by the willingness of Hadi's beleaguered supporters to ally with whoever they can. Marginally offsetting such developments, AQAP said that a drone strike on April 12 killed Ibrahim al-Rubaish, a Saudi national and former Guantanamo Bay detainee who was one of the group's leading members ([al-Jazeera](#), April 15). Al-Rubaish's death is likely to be a significant, if only temporary, blow to the group.

There is also some evidence that AQAP is mending relations with Hadramawt's powerful tribes, whose reaction to recent developments has been notably muted. On April 5, three days after AQAP captured al-Mukalla, the Hadramawt Tribes Confederacy (HTC), an alliance of the main local tribes, issued a statement merely denying that they "had signed an agreement" with Ansar al-Shari'a, the name under which AQAP has operated since 2012, and "firmly rejecting" any (unspecified) plans to destabilize the region ([HTC](#), April 5). Some days later, on April 12, the alliance issued a marginally stronger statement thanking the "Arab coalition force" for their support for Yemen and pledging to uphold "security" in Hadramawt region, although without specifically committing to fight the Houthis or AQAP ([HTC](#), April 12). These ambiguous statements suggest the tribes—while opposed to the Houthis and traditionally heavily bankrolled by the Saudis—are somewhat indifferent to both Hadi and AQAP, although they are possibly holding out for additional Saudi bribes or political concessions from Hadi. Indeed, Hadramawt tribes have little love for Hadi, whose forces killed one of Hadramawt's most respected tribal leaders—Shaykh Saad bin Habrishi al-Hamoomi—in an unprovoked attack in December 2013, triggering weeks of unrest ([Yemen Times](#), December 5, 2013). Meanwhile, areas of Hadramawt outside al-Mukalla have been calm in recent days, suggesting that

AQAP appears unwilling to provoke the tribes unnecessarily ([Mukalla Star](#), April 15). AQAP's alleged local rebranding as "Sons of Hadramawt" may be a further effort to avoid antagonizing these tribes, who themselves are likely to view the current unrest as a chance to advance their own regional agenda, and who are liable to regard AQAP less a potential threat than as potential pawn. In this context, AQAP's further expansion—ironically under the cover of U.S.-supported Saudi airstrikes and even through working with forces loyal to the country's internationally recognized president—seems likely to continue.

SPANISH ISLAMIC STATE ARRESTS ILLUSTRATE CONTINUING RECRUITMENT

James Brandon

Spanish police on April 8 arrested 11 men suspected of links to the Islamic State in a series of raids in Barcelona, Spain's second largest city, and in other locations in Catalonia ([El País](#), April 9). The group reportedly included five Moroccans, five ethnic Spanish converts to Islam and one 17-year-old Paraguayan who had recently converted ([El País](#), April 8). A Spanish prosecutor was quoted as saying that the group was "directly linked" to the Islamic State. The group had allegedly already sent four other individuals to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, but three—all from Barcelona—were arrested in December in Bulgaria while en route ([El País](#), December 19). The police reportedly said that the group had the potential to carry out attacks in Catalonia, but that the group posed no threat as it was under constant surveillance. However, according to other reports, the group's plans were well advanced and involved a plot to attack Jewish targets and to kidnap and behead a member of the public ([Times of Israel](#), April 10). The leader of the group was Antonio Saez Martinez, a 40-year-old ethnic Spanish hairdresser, who converted to Islam in an attempt to conquer his alcoholism, leading to him to growing a beard and reinventing himself as a hardline Salafist ([El Mundo](#), April 12).

The location of the arrests in and around Barcelona underlines the strong Salafist presence in some parts of Catalonia. For instance, following the arrests, Spanish Interior Minister Jorge Fernandez Diaz said that of the 98 mosques in the country known to promote a strict form of Salafism, 50 are in Catalonia ([Catalunya Radio](#), April 8). This enduring correlation between jihadism and Salafist activism underlines the role of hardline Salafism in creating sectarian and intolerant "mood music" in Muslim communities that

jihadists can easily exploit. In addition, in Terrassa, the city north of Barcelona where Antonio Saez Martinez lived, the immigrant population is estimated at over 40 percent and the local Muslim population at 20,000, creating a potentially fertile recruiting ground for Salafi and jihadist activists, particularly given Spain's high levels of unemployment (*El Mundo*, April 12).

Women from the Barcelona area have also been drawn to the Islamic State. For instance, on March 7, police arrested Samira Yerou, a Moroccan citizen living in Barcelona, as she arrived at the city's airport from Turkey, where she had been detained on suspicion of seeking to help Islamic State recruits cross into Syria (*Ministry of Interior*, March 7). In April, she was found guilty and sentenced to three years in prison (*RTVE*, April 10). Six others were arrested in the Catalonia region in mid-March for recruiting for the Islamic State, allegedly creating "complex virtual framework" for online radicalization through Twitter and Facebook (*El Mundo*, March 15). Likewise, in December 2014, a 25-year-old Chilean woman living in Barcelona, Peña Orellana, was one of seven people arrested for allegedly recruiting individuals to the Islamic State, primarily through social media (*La Cuarta*, December 17, 2014).

Although there have been no attacks by Islamic State supporters so far in Spain, future attacks cannot be discounted. For instance, a June 2014 Spanish-language video released online by Islamic State members, apparently in Iraq or Syria, directly threatened Spain, with the speaker saying: "We are living under the Islamic flag, the Islamic caliphate. We will die for it until we liberate those occupied lands, from Jakarta to Andalusia. And I declare: Spain is the land of our forefathers and we are going to take it back with the power of Allah" (*El Mundo*, July 1, 2014). This reflects that although Spain is a lesser member of the international coalition against the Islamic State, the country occupies a central and disproportionately prominent position in the imaginations of a wide range of Islamists, from al-Qaeda to the Muslim Brotherhood, on account of its former role as a Muslim colony, whose medieval Christian reconquest is regarded as a lasting affront (*El País*, October 8, 2014). As a result, while Islamic State activity seems to be currently focused on recruiting fighters to Iraq and Syria, it is entirely possible that in time the group may shift toward attackings Spain itself.

A Short Profile of Iraq's Shi'a Militias

Zana K. Gulmohamad

The Islamic State's sudden capture of much of northern Iraq, including the country's third largest city of Mosul, and the resulting collapse of the Iraqi Army, in June 2014, was a turning point for Shi'a militias in the country. Formerly sidelined, these groups have now been able to use the fight against the Islamic State to vastly restore their political and military power. A key trigger was the *fatwa* (religious edict) issued on June 13 by Iraq's highest ranking Shi'a cleric, Grand Ayatollah al-Sayyid Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani. Sistani's *fatwa* called upon "all able-bodied Iraqis" to defend the country, and "to volunteer into the security forces", an action which Sistani described as "wajib jihad al-kafai," i.e. an obligation to defend the country and its people (*Sistani.org*, June 13, 2014). On June 15, two days after the *fatwa*, Falih al-Fayyad, the government's national security advisor, announced the then-prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, had ordered the establishment of the "Hashd al-Sha'abi," or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organization for the newly resurgent Shi'a militias, in order to manage the tremendous flow of the Shi'a volunteers, and to organize their recruitment, equipping and deployment (*Herak*, July 7, 2014; *al-Sumaria*, January 15). It is estimated that close to a million volunteers answered Sistani's call and signed up in the following weeks and months (*Buratha News*, October 18, 2014). Some of the most important militias under the Hashd al-Sha'abi include the Badr Organization, Saraya al-Salam, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Saraya Taleaa al-Khorasani and Kata'ib Imam Ali.

Hashd al-Sha'abi

Hashd al-Sha'abi consists of around 40 predominantly Shi'a paramilitary forces groups, including thousands of well-equipped fighters (there are no verified numbers available), with insignificant numbers of Sunni recruits (*Noon Post*, January 12; *al-Araby*, January 4). Hashd al-Sha'abi is assisted by Iran via General Qasem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, the overseas paramilitary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF), which directly reports to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader. From the start, Iraq's existing Shi'a militia groups played a significant role in Hashd al-Sha'abi, which in turn legitimized their own presence and activities (*Herak*, July 7, 2014). Hashd al-Sha'abi's most powerful figure is its deputy chairman, who goes by the *nom de guerre* Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis but was born as Jamal Jafar Ibrahim. Al-Muhandis spent ten years

in Iran where he built close relations with the IRGC as the commander of Badr Brigade in 1985, which was based in Iran and fought against Saddam's regime ([Qanon](#), March 12). He has strong, long-established relations with the key figures in the Iranian security establishment ([al-Araby](#), January 4).

Hashd al-Sha'abi is funded by the Iraqi government, which not only provides the fighters' salaries but also its military capabilities; the Iraqi parliament has even allocated funds in the country's budget for the group ([al-Rafidayn](#), December 25, 2014; [Rudaw](#), January 29). The Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, has meanwhile praised its guerrilla warfare skills ([al-Sumaria](#), February 24). In addition, Hashd al-Sha'abi's "Media War Team" provides morale boosting battlefield updates and propaganda videos (for instance, showing footage of Shi'a fighters set to war songs) through YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. [1] The largest and most powerful groups with Hashd al-Sha'abi are:

Badr Organization

The most powerful Shi'a militia within Hashd al-Sha'abi, the Badr Organization, was founded in Iran in the early 1980s. It mainly consisted of the Iraqi soldiers and officers who had defected during the Iraq-Iran War, and was also the military wing of the Iran-backed Islamic Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution (renamed the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq in 2007). In 2003, it changed its name from the Badr Brigade to the "Badr Organization for Reconstruction and Development" to indicate its expanded political ambitions. In 2012, however, the Badr Organization split away from the Islamic Supreme Council, and is now headed by the former Iraqi transport minister Hadi al-Ameri, who has close relations with Soleimani. Badr follows the Khomeinist doctrine of "Wilayat al-faqih," in which an Islamic jurist (*faqih*) leads the government. Therefore, the group principally follows Khamenei ([Raseef](#), February 25; [Musings on Iraq](#), January 20). [2]

Badr has around 20,000 fighters, mostly experienced veterans, with its military capabilities directly supported by Baghdad and Tehran. Many prominent figures in Badr are government officials, such as Iraq's interior minister, Muhammad al-Ghabban ([al-Alalam](#), October 18, 2014). Badr's high-level connections in both Iran and Iraq have emboldened it to enlarge its presence in recent months and increase its leverage among the Shi'a militias in the fight against the Islamic State, in which it plays a leading role. The Badr Organization has also been active in Syria where it lost one of its military commanders, Shaykh Qusai Qazi al-Tamimi ([ABNA](#), April 9, 2014). [3]

Saraya al-Salam

The Saraya al-Salam militia was formed in June 2014 by Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadr movement and prominent Shi'a cleric, in response to the Islamic State's territorial gains. The core of al-Salam is formed by members of Sadr's Mahdi army, which was created in 2003 to oppose the U.S. occupation of Iraq, but has since been largely dormant since 2007, when it was heavily involved in sectarian violence. The group claims to have hundreds of thousands of well-equipped fighters, although this is probably unlikely; the real number is not known ([Raseef](#), February 25). In recent months, al-Salam has fought the Islamic State in Samarra, Jurf al-Sakhar, Diyala and Tikrit as well as Babil, to the south of Baghdad ([Khabaar](#), October 26, 2014; [Rudaw](#), March 15). Muqtada al-Sadr has a fluctuating relationship with Iran. Before the U.S. withdrawal, he was considered Iran's close ally, and his Mahdi army was fighting the Iraqi Security Forces. Now, however, he propagates more nationalistic Iraqi ideas, supports the Security Forces and is critical of Iran's interference in the country ([Sutuur](#), April 5). For instance, Sadr now promotes an "Iraq First" policy, opposes sending Shi'a fighters to Syria and is in competition with the Mahdi Army splinter group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq ([Now Lebanon](#), August 19, 2013; [al-Mokhtsar](#), December 17, 2013). Muqtada inherited his religious and political legitimacy from his father Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, an opponent of Saddam Hussein who is much revered by many Shi'as. Sadr's political wing is the Ahrar Block, which has 34 seats in the Iraqi parliament, and is now considered less conservative than the other Shi'a factions, even seeking alliances with the secular Iraqi National Accord led by Iyad Allawi ([Middle East Online](#), March 21; [Akhbarak](#), December 28, 2014).

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)

Formed from a splinter group of the Mahdi Army in 2006 and headed by Qais al-Khazali, a former hardline Mahdi Army militant, the AAH advocates the "Wilayat al-faqih" political system and overtly follows the traditional Iranian revolutionary clerics, such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Kazim al-Haeri and the current Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, as well as to some Iraqi Shi'a clerics, such as Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Muqtada's deceased father ([Ahl al-Haq](#), March 23, 2013). The AAH has a close relationship with Soleimani, from whom it receives financial and military assistance. The group became active in the Iraqi political scene from 2011, with the support of al-Maliki, who facilitated its outreach to the population after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops in 2011 ([al-Arabiya](#), November 6, 2014). The AAH is currently involved in fierce fighting against the Islamic State in the most keenly contested areas, including Tikrit, where it

has deployed several thousand fighters ([Iraq News Network](#), April 4; [al-Mustakbal](#), February 24).

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba

Formed out of a split within AAH, which itself had split from the Mahdi army, al-Nujaba parted ways from AAH in the beginning of 2013 under the leadership of Akram al-Ka'abi ([Musings on Iraq](#), March 31; [Sumerian](#), September 19, 2014). It is composed of three compact brigades; Liwa Ammar ibn Yasser, Liwa Imam al-Hassan al-Mujtaba and Liwa Hamd. Al-Nujaba predominantly consists of the Iraqi Shi'as, but there are non-Iraqi fighters in these brigades as well, for example from Bahrain and Kuwait ([Assakina](#), March 25). The group has strong relations with the IRGC-QF and Lebanon's Hezbollah, with Liwa ibn Yasser having fought alongside the latter in and around Aleppo in Syria ([Orient News](#), December 28, 2013). Al-Nujaba militants are the followers of Khamenei and propagate anti-American rhetoric ([al-Nujaba](#), January 12; [Sumerian](#), September 19, 2014). They are more militarily focused than some other Shi'a militias, fighting the Islamic State on several fronts, such as Samarra, and they also attacked Tikrit from the north in late March as part of the government offensive there ([al-Nujaba](#), March 31). The group also has a strong presence in Syria, where it fights alongside the Syrian regime.

Saraya Taleaa al-Khorasani

The military wing of the Islamic Taleaa Party, an Iraqi Shi'a political party, Saraya Taleaa al-Khorasani has been heavily involved in fighting the Islamic State in Iraq during the last year, particularly as part of Hashd al-Sha'abi. It has also operated in Syria since September 2013, particularly claiming to defend the important Shi'a Sayeda Zaynab shrine in Damascus ([ISP Iraq](#), November 5, 2013). Its leader, Ali al-Yasiri, has close relations with IRGC-QF commanders, who helped establish it and who support its activities ([Zaman](#), March 14). Iran has been conspicuously involved in creating, assisting and directing al-Khorasani, which in turn professes the "Wilayat al-faqih" doctrine, and overtly follows Khamenei, for instance, displaying his pictures prominently on its official website ([al-Khorasani](#), January 10; [Herak](#), August 5, 2014). The militia has an estimated 3,000 fighters and possesses modern Iranian-made light and medium weaponry ([Raseef](#), February 25; [al-Tagreer](#), January 13). Its most recent operations against the Islamic State were carried out in Tikrit.

Kata'ib Imam Ali

This nascent group was established in response to Sistani's *fatwa* in June 2014, as the armed wing of Harakat al-Iraq al-Islamiya, a Shi'a political movement. Ahebl al-Zaidi is the secretary general of this well-equipped group, which enjoys extensive cooperation with the Iraqi Security Forces and also connections with Soleimani. Al-Zaidi was once a Mahdi Army commander ([Dot Masr](#), January 13). The group recently took part in fighting against the Islamic State in Amerli, Baji Tuz, Diyala and Tikrit ([Kata'ib Imam Ali](#), March 2). Its second-in-command, Ali al-Musawi, was killed on the frontline in Tikrit, during fighting against the Islamic State, in late March ([Bas News](#), March 14). Kata'ib Imam Ali has also set up a Christian subgroup called Kata'ib Rouh Allah Issa Ibn Miriam (Brigades of Spirit of God Jesus Son of Mary). [4]

Other Groups

Other Shi'a militias operating as part of Hashd al-Sha'abi are Kata'ib Jund al-Imam, Saraya Ashura, Kata'ib al-Taiar al-Resali, Saraya al-A'tabat and Saraya al-Jihad, among others. Another is Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, a prominent elite force fighting against the Islamic State in Tikrit, which gained notoriety during the sectarian conflict in 2007. [5]

Conclusion

As the above shows, there are several clear trends among Iraq's largest Shi'a militia groups. The vast majority have close ties with conservative elements among Iranian leadership and with Iran's security apparatus at various levels. Additionally, most subscribe to the "Wilayat al-faqih" doctrine, and overtly profess allegiance to Khamenei, the de facto head of Iran's conservative faction. Many of the groups existed before Sistani's *fatwa* or else are splinter groups broken away from these established organizations, particularly from the Mahdi Army. It is also worth noting that most militias have an explicitly Shi'a religious and political identity, and they do not have Sunni recruits in significant numbers. The formation and rapid mobilization of these groups in summer 2014 prevented larger areas of Iraq, potentially even Baghdad itself, from falling to the Islamic State. However, in the long-term, the militias' support for a "Wilayat al-faqih" system, their frequently overtly sectarian agenda and influence of Iran's conservative factions and its al-Quds Force is likely to create fresh problems for the country and to hamper any reconciliation with Iraq's Arab Sunni minority.

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Notes

1. To see Hashd al-Sha'abi Media War Team YouTube videos, September 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw0o-ucjJuasQ3Afm25Vkgw>.
2. For information about Wilayat al-faqih, see "What is Wilayat al-Faqih," al-Islam, August 1, 2014, <http://www.al-islam.org/Shi'a-political-thought-ahmed-vaezi/what-wilayat-al-faqih>.
3. For Badr Organization activities in Syria, see YouTube, February 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oXXI5Jg8Rk>.
4. Kata'ib Rouh Allah Issa Ibn Miriam (Brigades of Spirit of God Jesus Son of Mary) training YouTube Video, December 28, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oI8PcaKmgZw>.
5. For information about designation of Kata'ib Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organisation, see the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, July 2, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/125582.htm>.

Iran Confronts Intensifying Insurgent Offensive in Sistan-Balochistan Province

Chris Zambelis

While diplomatic developments between Iran and the United States over Iran's nuclear program and Iran's actions in countries such as Syria and Yemen have drawn the most attention in recent weeks, a series of attacks in Iran's southeastern Sistan-Balochistan province underline that a range of ethnic Baloch militant factions continue to wage a bloody insurgency there. Iran frequently blames hostile outside powers, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and Israel, among others, of supporting the ethnic Baloch insurgency and other violent opposition factions operating in the country. Yet a combination of factors, including the region's political and economic marginalization, an array of ethnic and religious grievances derived from the ethnic Baloch and largely Sunni faith of its inhabitants against what is perceived as an exclusionary and repressive ethnic Persian-centric Shi'a government and the spread of Sunni extremist ideologies has provided a fertile atmosphere for armed insurrection.

Latest Attacks

In one incident, on April 6, eight Iranian border police officers were killed and another was wounded when they were ambushed by Jaysh al-Adl (JAA—Army of Justice), an ethnic Baloch militant group that is believed to have emerged sometime in 2012. The attack occurred in the town of Negur, near the Iran-Pakistan border ([al-Arabiya](#) [Dubai], April 7). The group broadcasted its claim of responsibility along with alleged photographs of the aftermath of the attack—including images of a smoldering military pickup truck and a motorcycle—on its network of social media platforms, such as its official blogs and Twitter account ([Edaalat News](#), April 7; [JashulAdl3](#), April 7). [1] The announcement was followed by the April 11 posting of what JAA claims to be video footage of the attack on its affiliated YouTube page ([YouTube](#), April 11). Iranian officials meanwhile reported that the militants retreated into Pakistani territory after the attack. This is the single-most deadly attack on Iranian security forces in Sistan-Balochistan since an October 2013 JAA attack killed 14 border police officers at a border checkpoint in the town of Rustak, just outside of Saravan, close to the Iran-Pakistan border ([Dawn](#) [Karachi], April 8). In another recent incident, JAA announced on April 9 that it had killed two signals intelligence officers associated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in

Sistan-Balochistan's Mehrestan region in the east-central part of the province ([Press TV](#) [Tehran], April 9). A claim of responsibility, along with graphic photographs of what JAA alleges are the remains of the dead IRGC officers, was again disseminated via JAA's official social media outlets ([Edaalat News](#), April 9; [JashulAdl3](#), April 9).

JAA's attack occurred shortly following an April 6 announcement by Iranian officials that the IRGC had disrupted a militant cell based in Qasr Qand in the southeast part of Sistan-Balochistan. The operation was reported to have resulted in the deaths of three militants. Two other militants were injured and scores of others were arrested. A sizeable cache of arms and explosives was also reportedly uncovered at the scene. While Iran has not publicized the identity of the militant faction, they have accused it of acting at the behest of enemy foreign intelligence services ([Tasnim News Agency](#) [Tehran], April 7; [Fars News Agency](#) [Tehran], April 6). While the operation that targeted the Iranian border police officers was claimed by JAA, some early reports attributed the attack to Ansar al-Furqan (AF—Partisans of the Criterion), another ethnic Baloch insurgent faction that is likewise engaged in a campaign of violence against the Islamic Republic. AF also claimed to have shot down an Iranian military helicopter operated by the Basij paramilitary forces around Qasr Qand. Video footage that allegedly showed the downed helicopter was broadcast on AF's numerous social media platforms, including via its official Twitter account @ANSAR_ALFURQAAN, on April 9 ([Twitter](#), April 9). The dissemination of the footage coincided with the recirculation of a video statement by AF spokesman Abu Hafs al-Balochi that appears to have been previously broadcast in February that reaffirmed AF's determination to wage war against Iran ([YouTube](#), February 6). The wave of attacks against Iranian forces in Sistan-Balochistan also occurred against the backdrop of an announcement in March by Pakistan that it had detained ranking ethnic Baloch militant commanders in Quetta, the provincial capital of Pakistani Balochistan. Iran has demanded that Pakistan transfer the detainees to its custody ([Express Tribune](#) [Karachi], March 9; [Pakistan Today](#) [Lahore], March 1).

Mapping the Militants

The multiplicity of armed factions that are waging a campaign of violence and terrorism against Iranian security forces and other displays of Iranian rule in Sistan-Balochistan draw direct inspiration or are otherwise linked through familial and tribal ties to the now defunct Jundallah group, and its late founder and leader Abdelmalek Rigi. [2] The capture of Rigi by Iranian security forces in February 2010, and his subsequent execution in the same year, appeared to

temporarily dampen the ethnic Baloch insurgency. However, the disruption of Jundallah would eventually give rise to a host of other armed detachments composed of former Jundallah members and followers that appear to maintain tangential, if not direct, operational linkages. As evidenced by the symbolism and discourse adopted by militant factions such as JAA, AF—which itself emerged following the 2013 merger of ethnic Baloch factions Harkat Ansar Iran (HAI—Movement of the Partisans Iran) and Hizb al-Furqan (HAF, Party of the Criterion)—the Rigi surname is a recurring theme in the annals of ethnic Baloch militancy in Sistan-Balochistan ([Ansarirana](#), December 5, 2013). In addition, while the precise identity of the ethnic Baloch militant that is currently being held in Pakistan is unclear, there appears to be a direct link to the late Rigi. For example, Iran has requested that Abdel Sattar Rigi, a purported brother of the late Jundallah commander and alleged leader of Jaysh al-Nasr (JAN—Army of Victory), another ethnic Baloch militant group based in Sistan-Balochistan, be extradited to Iran. Yet Pakistan claims that it has instead detained Abdel Salam Rigi, a ranking member of JAA and cousin of the late Jundallah leader ([Express Tribune](#) [Karachi], March 9). The prominence of the Rigi family in ethnic Baloch militancy in Sistan-Balochistan has not been lost on Iran. Jundallah and its progeny are frequently referred to as the “Rigi Clan.” In addition, JAA and AF also identify Sipah-e-Sahaba Iran (SSI—Guardians of the Companions Iran), another obscure extremist faction based in Sistan-Balochistan, as an ally in their campaign against the Islamic Republic, further indicating the loose links between these groups.

Background to Rebellion

A key factor driving the insurgency in Sistan-Balochistan is the character of Iran's state-periphery dynamics and the position occupied by ethnic and religious minorities in the country. Life in Sistan-Balochistan, where the majority of Iran's ethnic Baloch minority of around 3 million resides—Sistan-Balochistan is sometimes referred to as Iranian Balochistan—is characterized by poverty, underdevelopment and oppression. Sistan-Balochistan's location adjacent to Pakistan and Afghanistan also puts it in the middle of one of the world's most dangerous drug, arms and human trafficking corridors, which has also exposed the region's population to the overbearing presence of Iranian security forces. Their status as an ethnic minority in Iran's ethnically and culturally Persian-dominated society is further amplified by their largely Sunni affiliation within Iran's Shi'a Islamist theocratic state. Emblematic of this situation is that Jundallah initially touted itself as a defender of ethnic Baloch rights alongside other oppressed ethnic and religious communities in Iran. However, it would eventually adopt an

overtly sectarian-infused narrative that emphasized hardline Salafist and similarly extremist perspectives. This included concepts echoed in the ideologies and discourse propagated by al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly explicit anti-Shiism; hardline Salafists tend to consider Shi'a Muslims as heretics and apostates and the Islamic Republic as a wellspring of Shi'a dogma. Jundallah's eventual resort to suicide bombings—a tactic that has become a regular feature of ethnic Baloch militancy in recent years—has hinted at the influence of al-Qaeda-style extremism within the large milieu of the ethnic Baloch opposition. Indeed, the nature and tone of the messaging and symbolism used by the current generation of ethnic Baloch extremists leave little doubt of the centrality of hardline Salafist principles to their campaign against Iran. For instance, AF often refers to Iran's rulers (and Shi'a believers in general) as *rafidah* (rejectionists), a pejorative label ascribed to Shi'a Muslims by Sunni extremists (YouTube, February 6).

Outlook

The progressively sectarian-tinged regional atmosphere combined with the wider geopolitical dynamics illustrated by the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia will likely catalyze further displays of violence in Sistan-Balochistan by an increasingly emboldened insurgency. The potential second-order impacts of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan coupled with growing instability in Pakistan, including in Pakistan's own Balochistan province, where there is also a long-running Baloch insurgency, will also continue to shape the course of developments in Sistan-Balochistan in the months ahead.

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Note

1. JAA's Twitter account can be found at <https://twitter.com/ArmyOfJustice>.
2. For a more detailed treatment of the evolving landscape of ethnic Baloch militancy in Iran, see Chris Zambelis, "The Evolution of the Ethnic Baloch Insurgency in Iran," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, Issue 3, March 26, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-evolution-of-the-ethnic-baluch-insurgency-in-iran>.

After Garissa: Kenya Revises Its Security Strategy to Counter al-Shabaab's Shifting Tactics

Andrew McGregor

Al-Shabaab's April 2 attack on Kenya's Garissa University College that killed 147 non-Muslim students was the latest installment in al-Shabaab's campaign to force Nairobi to order a withdrawal of the Kenyan Defense Force (KDF) from the Jubaland region of southern Somalia. So far, the Kenyan government has presented an uncoordinated response that has largely focused on Islamist militancy as a foreign problem that is being imported (along with hundreds of thousands of unwanted refugees) across Kenya's porous border with neighboring Somalia.

Background

The KDF moved into southern Somalia in 2011 as part of Operation Linda Nchi, designed to deter cross-border infiltration of radical Islamists, create a Kenyan-controlled buffer zone in southern Somalia and establish suitable conditions for the return of the massive Somali refugee population dwelling in Kenya's largely ethnic-Somali North Eastern Province. KDF troops in Somalia joined the larger African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in February 2012.

In military terms, the KDF presence has exerted a slow but ultimately relentless pressure on Somalia's al-Shabaab movement. The seizure of the port at Kuday Island (southern Juba region, south of Kismayo) by KDF and Somali National Army (SNA) forces during an amphibious operation on March 22 drove al-Shabaab from its last access point to the sea, dealing the organization a severe blow and leaving it effectively surrounded by hostile forces (Raxanreeb, March 22). Military pressure from AMISOM and financial pressures created by the gradual loss of access to every port prompted a strategic overhaul of the group's activities. For al-Shabaab, direct confrontations with Somali security forces or the much stronger AMISOM deployment are out; a greater focus on terrorist tactics (including bombings, assassinations and assaults on soft targets by well-armed gunmen) is in. Expelling the KDF is a priority, and the movement is willing to exploit ethnic tensions in Kenya's North Eastern Province to achieve this goal.

The region's ethnic-Somali population (belonging largely to the powerful Ogadeni clan) was geographically divided in 1925, when Britain gave the northern half of the region

(modern Jubaland) to Italy. The southern half of the region is now Kenya's North Eastern Province. The division was massively unpopular with the region's ethnic-Somalis, leading the British to close the region from 1926 to 1934. Dislike of the Kenyan government (dominated by the Kikuyu tribe) erupted into the Shifta War of 1963-1967. Dissatisfaction with the administration has been punctuated by sporadic political violence in the region ever since, the worst example being the 1984 Wagalla Massacre of thousands of ethnic-Somalis by Kenyan security forces. [1]

The Assault on Garissa College University

Kenya's security forces may have relaxed prematurely after seizing Kismayo, al-Shabaab's largest port, in 2012. While taking Kismayo fulfilled Nairobi's objective of creating an autonomous buffer zone ("Jubaland") between Kenya and the rest of Somalia, it only intensified al-Shabaab's hatred of Kenya and its determination to retake Somali-inhabited areas of Kenya, even if it means the use of terrorist atrocities targeting Kenyan civilians. The border became no less permeable with the creation of a Kenya-reliant Jubaland administration, yet the Kenyan government continued to neglect border security in the North Eastern Province, where roads and other infrastructure are few and far between.

The attack at Garissa appears to have been well-planned—university administrators said two of the terrorists had posed as students while using a room on campus as a "command center," complete with food and supplies that appeared to be intended for a long battle (*Standard* [Nairobi], April 10). Survivors described the attackers as speaking Swahili (Kenya's main language) rather than Somali (*Mail & Guardian* [Johannesburg], April 4). Militants told at least one survivor of the attack: "Tell your President to withdraw KDF from Somalia and ensure that North Eastern [province] belongs to Muslims. Garissa must also be part of Somalia and not Kenya" (*Standard* [Nairobi], April 11).

While helicopters were made available to take the Interior Cabinet Secretary (who routinely assures Kenyans the government is keeping them safe) and the Inspector General of Police to Garissa, the elite counter-terrorist Recce company of the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) got stuck in traffic on their way to the airport, where they were transported to Garissa by fixed wing aircraft while their equipment travelled by road (*Star* [Nairobi], April 11). The aircraft that should have been available to transport the Recce unit was unavailable as it had been used that morning to fly private individuals to Mombasa and pick up the daughter-in-law of police air-wing chief Rogers Mbithi (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], April 13; *Star* [Nairobi], April 15).

This suggests that Kenyan authorities have not absorbed the lessons of the 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall, particularly in regard to having transport available for its rapid response units. In the Westgate incident, Kenya's elite 40 Rangers Strike Force arrived at the mall from their base at Gilgil (roughly 75 kilometers north of Nairobi) 12 hours after the attack began, and promptly engaged in a gunfight with members of the General Service Unit (GSU), a paramilitary wing of the National Police Service. Action against the terrorists still inside the mall was confused as many members of the police and military devoted themselves to looting the mall rather than rescuing hostages. In response to the resulting public outrage, the Kenyan military sacked and jailed two members of its elite 40 Rangers Strike Force and declared the matter finished (*Standard* [Nairobi], October 30, 2013).

Though the Kenyan government continues to treat al-Shabaab as an external threat, there is evidence that the radical Islamist threat is an internal problem, albeit one inspired by al-Shabaab. The alleged planner of the attack, Mohamed Kuno (a.k.a. Mohamed Dulyadin; a.k.a. Gamadhare; a.k.a. Shaykh Mohamud), has strong connections to Kenya's ethnic-Somali community. Kuno worked as a teacher and principal of a *madrassa* in Garissa from 1997 to 2000, where he is remembered for his religious radicalism before his departure for Somalia (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], April 2). Once in Somalia, Kuno acted as a commander in some of the heaviest fighting in Mogadishu, and, for a time, even served in the al-Shabaab-allied Ras Kamboni Brigade under Shaykh Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe," who ironically is now the Kenyan-backed "president" of Jubaland (*Mail & Guardian* [Johannesburg], April 4). The former teacher is the prime suspect in the massacre of 28 Kenyan Christians in Mandera County in November 2014 and the killing of a further 36 Christian quarry workers in Mandera in December 2014. At present, Kano is responsible for al-Shabaab operations in Jubaland and Kenya.

In the wake of the attack, opposition leaders continue to demand a KDF withdrawal from Somalia in order to concentrate on border security, suggesting that the United States try to persuade other nations without a common border with Somalia to replace the Kenyan troops (*Standard* [Nairobi], April 11).

A Failure of Intelligence?

In the border regions, there are few Kenyan intelligence officers from the local ethnic-Somali community, contributing to Kenya's continued inability to secure its border with Somalia (*Standard* [Nairobi], April 12). In

addition, Kenyan authorities appear to have ignored foreign intelligence reports passed to them:

- Three weeks before the Garissa attack, UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond warned that Kenya was not acting on intelligence information regarding possible terrorist activity—only a day before the Garissa attack, President Kenyatta called British travel advisory warnings on Kenya an attempt “to intimidate us with these threats” (*Standard* [Nairobi], April 5).
- Iran is reported to have supplied information on March 22 of pending attacks on Kenyan Christians in university areas of Garissa, Nairobi and Mombasa prior to the assault on the Garissa University, where Christians were singled out (*Standard* [Nairobi], April 12).
- On March 27, Australia issued a warning of an impending terrorist attack in Nairobi (*Reuters*, March 28).
- According to a student interviewed by Reuters, whose account was corroborated by northern Kenyan MPs, the administration of the Garissa Teacher’s College closed the school days before the attack, telling students that strangers had been spotted in the college and that a terrorist attack might be imminent. This action was not followed by the rest of the campus, which remained open. According to one MP, “Some of us have seen the intelligence reports, and I can assure you they were specific and actionable” (*Reuters*, April 3).

The Kenyan Response

The KDF’s immediate reaction to the Garissa massacre was to bomb al-Shabaab camps in Somalia, including Camp Shaykh Ismail, Camp Gondodwe, Camp Bardheere and what was described as a major camp in Gedo Region where some 800 militants were based. Though the KDF claimed each base was completely destroyed (unlikely considering that only ten aircraft were used and the cloudy conditions at the time), al-Shabaab made the equally unlikely claim that all the bombs had fallen harmlessly on farmland (*Star* [Nairobi], April 6). Inside Kenya, critical assessments of Kenya’s response to terrorist threats posed by al-Shabaab and its Kenyan allies tend to be treated as unpatriotic outbursts that identify the holder of such sentiments as potential terrorist-sympathizers. Deputy President Ruto (the government’s point-man on the Garissa issue) recently demanded that some Kenyan leaders should stop “cheering” al-Shabaab attacks inside Kenya (*Capital FM* [Nairobi], April 12).

Beyond the military response, focus has concentrated on the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya’s North Eastern Province. The camp, the largest refugee center in Africa with between

350,000 to 500,000 Somali residents, was set up in 1991, and its population (mainly women and children) has grown every year despite claims from many Kenyan politicians that the facility harbors terrorists. Following the Garissa attack, Deputy President Ruto demanded that the UNHCR close Dadaab in three months’ time, or Kenya would relocate the refugees itself (*BBC*, April 12).

Recent remarks by former deputy prime minister Musalia Mudavadi (in which he was supported by several MPs) gave some indication of the political mood regarding the continued existence of the Dadaab camp and its alleged threat to Kenyans:

The camp accommodates Somalia terrorists who disguise themselves as refugees. They use the camp as a base to collect intelligent information about Kenyan institutions and relay back to their accomplices in Somalia... The refugees stay in the country, seek assistance from us, mingle with our people freely yet they gather information on how to lay a trap on us. They hide their true colors and plan on how to kill us. They need to move out immediately (*Star* [Nairobi], April 6).

Kenyan officials insist that KDF operations in southern Somalia have now created safe spaces suitable for the return of the refugees (*BBC*, April 11). However, a UNHCR spokesman cited a tripartite treaty with Kenya and Somalia specifying that any return by refugees to Somalia must be voluntary, adding rather bluntly that “moving that number of people [in an unsystematic fashion] will not be possible” (*RFI*, April 12).

Big Fences Make Good Neighbors?

While spectacular attacks such as that on Garissa University make international headlines, there is also a daily war of attrition going on in the border counties of northeastern Kenya. According to Kenyan anti-terrorism police, there has been a terrorist attack every ten days (135 in total) since the KDF deployment in Somalia began in 2011. Most of these attacks, killing over 500 people in total, occurred in Kenya’s North Eastern province. (*Mail & Guardian* [Johannesburg], April 10). Ali Roba, governor of Mandera County, said in March that up to 90 people had died from terrorist activity in Mandera in the previous seven months alone, adding that he himself had survived six assassination attempts (*Standard* [Nairobi], March 22).

Most of this activity is blamed by the authorities on the infiltration of al-Shabaab terrorists across the poorly defended

border. Nairobi's solution, despite Somali objections, is to build a massive wall of concrete and fencing along the border, separating the ethnic Somali residents of Kenya's North Eastern Province from their fellow Ogadeni clansmen in Somalia's Kenyan-occupied Jubaland State (*Standard* [Nairobi], March 22). The hastily-implemented "Somalia Border Control Project" will cost an estimated \$260 million. The porous border with Somalia is 680 kilometers long, but it is still unclear if the project will cover that entire distance. (*Mail & Guardian* [Johannesburg], April 10). Defending the wall will require an enormous and expensive permanent deployment of police or troops whose supplies will need to be trucked in despite a general absence of roads in the region.

Police Recruits

Deep corruption in the security services, especially the police, has produced a certain lethargy in Kenya's response to terrorist activity. Unsurprisingly, the Garissa massacre is now being used to legitimize corrupt police hiring practices that were recently the subject of an unfavorable ruling by Kenya's High Court, which still maintains a reputation for honesty and independence from the executive branch. The ruling cancelled the 2014 recruitment of 10,000 police recruits who had paid substantial bribes for a place on the police force.

Despite the ruling, the president issued a directive that the 10,000 police recruits should report for training immediately to protect the border with Somalia. This led to a flurry of contradictory statements from various government and oversight sources that pointed to a severe breakdown between the executive branch and the judiciary. The president's directive constitutes a violation of the Kenyan constitution, an offense for which the president could be impeached. Kenyatta, however, has the support of a majority of parliament, making impeachment proceedings unlikely (*Standard* [Nairobi], April 12).

Amniyat on the Ropes?

Created by late al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane "Abu Zubayr," Amniyat is a secretive unit within al-Shabaab that acts as the organization's intelligence unit while also providing internal security, operational planning and bodyguard services for al-Shabaab's leader. In Godane's hands, Amniyat was used to crush internal dissent through a string of assassinations and to orchestrate ruthless attacks on civilians both inside Somalia and beyond in AMISOM-member nations like Kenya and Uganda. Godane used Amniyat to consolidate his control of al-Shabaab by suspending the al-Shabaab Shura and making Amniyat the

most powerful force within the organization while reporting directly to him. Amniyat has been particularly successful in infiltrating the Somali security forces and even the highest levels of the Somali Federal Government, enabling the group to carry out brazen attacks within Mogadishu and other cities before melting back into the population (*Raxanreeb.com*, October 22, 2014). Nonetheless, with massacres like Westgate and Garissa to their credit, Amniyat's leaders have become targets for Somalia's central government and its ally, the United States:

- In January 2014, a U.S. drone strike killed Sahal Iskudhuq, a senior Amniyat member.
- In late December 2014, a U.S. drone strike killed Abdishakur Tahlil, the new Amniyat commander, only days after he succeeded Zakariya Hersi as leader of the unit (*BBC*, December 31, 2014).
- Former Amniyat leader Zakariya Ahmed Ismail Hersi defected from al-Shabaab to the government in January. The former al-Shabaab intelligence chief renounced violence at a government-sponsored news conference, but his defection may have been due to a feeling of insecurity due to tensions within the group's leadership (*Business Insider*, January 28).
- In early February of this year, a U.S. drone strike in Dinsor killed Yusuf Dheeq, a senior Amniyat member, and several other al-Shabaab fighters (*Dalsan Radio* [Mogadishu], February 6).
- In late March, high-ranking Amniyat operative Mohamed Ali Hassan surrendered to Somali National Army forces in the Bakool region of southern Somalia (*Garowe Online*, March 30).
- Adan Garaar, believed to be the head of Amniyat's external operations, was killed in a U.S. drone strike at Bardhere in mid-March. Garaar was a leading planner of the September 2013 Westgate attack in which 70 people were killed, as well as being especially active in organizing a wave of terrorist attacks and massacres in northeast Kenya's Mandera County (*Star* [Nairobi], March 14; *Standard* [Nairobi], March 22).

Amniyat appears to have responded to these relentless attacks on its leadership by mounting ever more spectacular attacks on civilian soft-targets, especially within Kenya, where it operates with little local interference.

Conclusion

The presence of 2.5 million ethnic Somalis in Kenya's chronically underdeveloped northeast region can no longer be ignored by Nairobi if it is to deal with the terrorist threat from al-Shabaab, which is also eager to recruit non-

Somali Muslims in Kenya. President Kenyatta appears to have accepted the internal nature of the Islamist threat on April 4, when he told the nation: “Our task of countering terrorism has been made all the more difficult by the fact that the planners and financiers of this brutality are deeply embedded in our communities” (*Guardian*, April 5). At the same time, however, Kenya’s efforts are likely to be in vain so long as Kenya’s security forces fail to learn from or even acknowledge past mistakes in order to protect their reputation. In addition, Nairobi’s larger strategy of creating a buffer-state in Jubaland must also be regarded as a financially and diplomatically expensive failure in terms of ending the cross-border movement of terrorists and refugees.

Though the KDF is now in control of southern Somalia, the question is how long it would take after a KDF withdrawal for al-Shabaab forces to begin rebuilding their movement by retaking important ports like Kismayo. Recidivism is a common theme in al-Shabaab ideology (ethnic-Somalis are currently spread across several countries) and remarks made by the attackers at Garissa indicate the movement may have greater aspirations in northeastern Kenya than merely putting pressure on Nairobi. Kenya’s incursion into Somalia may have locked the nation into a long and costly struggle, pitting a government, which is determined to hold onto northeastern Kenya, against radical Somali Islamists who are intent on reversing the colonial division of 1925.

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Note

1. The number of dead ranges from 380 (a government estimate) to 5,000. The victims were members of the Degodia, an ethnic-Somali clan resident in Kenya that is part of the larger Hawiye confederation.