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KURDS IN NORTHERN SYRIA STRIKE MAJOR BLOW AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE

James Brandon

The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (Yekineyen Parastina Gel—YPG) militia struck an important blow against the Islamic State militant organization on June 15 by capturing the strategically important town of Tal Abyad, a key border crossing between Syria and Turkey (*Rudaw*, June 16). The town (known as Gire Spi in Kurdish) was the nearest border crossing to the Islamic State-held Raqqa, the militant group’s de facto Syrian capital, and was a key transit point for the Islamic State’s weapons, money and recruits. The Islamic State’s loss of the town, which it captured from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in 2014, means that the Islamic State’s main overland link with Turkey is now located much further to the west, along roads highly vulnerable to U.S. airstrikes. The Kurds’ capture of the town is therefore likely to create important logistical challenges for the Islamic State, as well as to increase the group’s vulnerability to further attack by hampering their lines of communications. Saleh Moslem, the co-president of the YPG’s political wing, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat—PYD), said the Islamic State’s “lifblood had been cut” by the Kurdish victory (*ANF News*, June 17).

For the YPG, and its Turkish Kurdish sister organization the Kurdish Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—PKK), the town’s capture is also of intense strategic importance as it allows the group to link their western enclave of Kobane with their main territories located in the northeast of Syria, as well as further retrenching their current gains. Murat Karayılan, the acting leader of the PKK, said: the town’s capture was “important for Rojava [Syrian] Kurdistan not only because it finally united the two cantons but also because it reaffirmed the liberation of Kobane. Kobanê is no longer under siege and will not be attacked easily” (*ANF News*, June 17). In response, Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government, which has often been inclined to regard the YPG

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as a potential rival, meanwhile issued a somewhat stilted statement saying that “we highly appreciate the role of other forces along with YPG who cleared the town of ISIS [the previous name of the Islamic State]” (*Hawler Times* [Erbil], June 17). The YPG, meanwhile, said that it was continuing to attack Islamic State forces in rural areas near the town (*ANF News*, June 20).

Two important elements of the YPG victory are the group’s close coordination with the United States, which supported it with airstrikes, and its increased cooperation with non-Kurdish groups, such as the mainly Arab and largely secular FSA. It is also attempting to build such coalitions elsewhere. For instance, a YPG commander in the group’s eastern Jazeera canton said earlier in June that it was working with a range of smaller Arab groups, including the Tahrir Brigade, Revolutionaries of Raqqa, Sanadid Brigade, Syriac Military Council and local Arab tribal forces (*ARA News*, June 13). The long-term durability of such alliances will depend heavily on how the YPG/PYD manages its newly captured territories. The PYD’s Saleh Muslim said that “a civil administration will be formed in which all the social components will be fairly represented,” a reference to Tal Abyad’s complex religious and ethnic mix, which includes not only Kurds but also large numbers of Muslim and Christian Arabs (*ARA News*, June 18). Significantly, days later on June 25, the Islamic State killed dozens in a substantial attack on Kobane, reportedly after infiltrating the town while disguised as FSA fighters. The attack is likely intended to divert Kurds from moving further towards Raqqa and to sow fresh distrust between local Kurds and Arabs (*ARA News*, June 26).

The YPG’s capture of the town from the Islamic State also triggered a flood of partisan criticism and thinly-disguised propaganda. From Syria, a group of 12 mainly hardline and predominantly Arab Islamist rebel groups, including Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, issued a joint statement accusing the YPG forces of implementing “a new sectarian and ethnic cleansing campaign against Sunni Arabs and Turkmen under the cover of coalition airstrikes which have contributed bombardment, terrorising civilians and forcing them to flee their villages” (*al-Araby al-Jadeed*, June 15). Meanwhile, Harun Yahya, an influential Turkish Islamic televangelist, published a near-hysterical polemic warning that “an attack on the region being carried out by the YPG... [and] coalition planes horrifyingly dropped bombs on the local residents of Tal Abyad,” and also that “a communist state is being built on the Turkish border with U.S. help, and that communist state intends to spread violence across the world” (*Arab News* [Jeddah], June 20). Al-Jazeera, the Qatar-based and funded channel, meanwhile gave heavy coverage to an alleged exodus of Arabs from Tal Abyad, likely reflecting the pan-

Arabist and pro-Islamist sympathies of its owners (*al-Jazeera*, June 19). This flood of verbal attacks suggests the difficulties that the Syrian Kurds and the YPG, in particular, will face as they seek to secure their recent gains, even though their recent victory has underlined that they remain the only non-Islamist rebel force capable of effectively opposing the Islamic State in Syria. One effect of this campaign is that the group continues to maintain relations with the Syrian government, one of the few regional powers that has not verbally or physically attacked it; for instance, on June 15, the day before the capture of Tal Abyad, the Syrian prime minister, Wael al-Halaqi, made an unprecedented and apparently cordial visit to the YPG-controlled cities of Qamishli and al-Hasakah (*Rudaw*, June 15). This underlines that the YPG remains far more concerned with liberating Kurdish territories from the Islamic State and establishing some form of self-rule than with the broader dynamics of the Syrian civil war. Indeed, with each fresh victory such as Tel Abyad, the PYD brings an increasing proportion of Kurdish-inhabited territory under its control leaving less under the control of the Islamic State, a trend which, if continued, is likely to mean the more successful the group is against the Islamic State the more it is likely to progressively withdraw from the fight against the group to focus on its own internal state-building.

AQAP, ISLAMIC STATE RESURGENT IN YEMEN

James Brandon

A U.S. drone strike in Yemen’s eastern Hadramawt province on June 12 killed Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the amir of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda’s official subsidiary in the country (*al-Jazeera*, June 17). His death was later confirmed by AQAP, which shortly afterward executed two alleged spies in al-Mukalla, put their bodies on public display and distributed the images on social media (*Mukalla Star*, June 19). The group also announced that Qasim al-Raymi, formerly the group’s military commander, would now become its overall leader (*Daily Star* [Beirut], June 16). The impact of the leadership change on the group is currently unclear. Although al-Wuhayshi was a long-standing, charismatic and experienced leader, as well as one of the highest profile jihadists in the Middle East, his replacement is also experienced and is likely to prove equally capable in the long-run.

Underlining that the jihadist challenge in Yemen is far bigger than al-Wuhayshi, Sunni jihadists in recent weeks continued to launch attacks against the Houthis, the Zaydi Shi’a

movement that currently controls the capital Sana'a. Most recently, on June 20, a car bomb exploded outside a mosque in Sana'a's Old City used by the Houthis, killing two people (*Saba News*, June 20). The Islamic State, AQAP's rival, later claimed responsibility for the attack. Three days earlier, on June 17, two car bombs had targeted two mosques in Old Sana'a known to have been regularly worshipped at by the Houthis, killing two people and wounding 60, although no group claimed responsibility (*Saba News*, June 18). At the same time, Saudi airstrikes against both military and other targets linked to the Houthis and their allies from the regular Yemeni military have continued in Sana'a and elsewhere, for instance targeting the Ministry of Defense in the capital on June 12 (*Yemen Times*, June 12). Saudi airstrikes on the same day also destroyed several civilian houses in the Old City, although a Saudi military spokesman Ahmed Assiri unconvincingly claimed that Saudi "has not performed any operations in these historic districts and has not targeted ancient Sana'a" (*Gulf News*, June 13). Given the international opprobrium that descended on Saudi Arabia after the bombing of the Old City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it was perhaps fortuitous for Riyadh that historic Houthi-frequented mosques in the same areas were shortly afterwards struck by car bombs, only one of which was claimed by the Islamic State, causing collateral damage to houses and nearby civilians but not to Saudi Arabia's reputation.

Indeed, one of the most important factors in Yemen in coming months will be the precise relations between AQAP and other anti-Houthi elements, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the beleaguered government of internationally-recognized prime minister, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Just as al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, is being increasingly openly backed by Qatar and other Sunni-ruled countries against both the more extreme Islamic State and the country's Shi'a-led government, so it is possible that such countries may also seek to use AQAP against the Houthis in the coming months, particularly given the failure of either Hadi loyalists or airstrikes to dislodge the Houthis from the capital and other areas. Underlining the risk that Saudi Arabia, Hadi's internationally recognized government and other regional powers could begin working with AQAP is the fact that one member of Hadi's delegation to recent Geneva peace-talks was Abd al-Rahman al-Humayqani; al-Humayqani, in December 2013, was named a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the U.S. Treasury on account of his close links to AQAP (*Middle East Eye*, June 19). The U.S. government at the time said that "Humayqani was an important figure within AQAP and reportedly had a relationship with important AQAP leaders," and had "provided financial support and other services to AQAP and acted for or on behalf of the group," a view which it has not

retracted (*U.S. Treasury Department*, December 18, 2013). A further indication of the potentially converging interests of Hadi, Saudi Arabia and AQAP occurred in Hadramawt province on June 20, when gunmen on motorbikes—a form of assassination previously used by AQAP—shot dead Hussein Abdul Bari al-Aidaros, a popular and moderate Sunni imam from Shibam, who had been known as an outspoken critic of the Saudi airstrikes (*Saba News*, June 20). The above incidents underline that the present chaos in Yemen is creating complex and potentially dangerous new political realignments, not least because of the potential for the Western-backed government of Yemen, increasingly desperate to retake the capital from the firmly entrenched Houthis, to empower a newly resurgent AQAP, a bitter enemy of the Houthis, in order to do so.

Iranian Perspectives on Yemen's Houthis

Nima Adalkah

A central element in the ongoing crisis in Yemen is the perception among Sunni-led states that Iran is playing a central role in supporting the Houthi Shi'a rebel movement militarily and politically, and fear of growing Iranian influence in Yemen has been a key factor behind the ongoing Saudi-led military airstrikes in the country ([Entekhab \[Qom\]](#), April 9). Less well-known, however, is the evolution of Iranian public attitudes and statements to the country, and particularly towards the Houthis, who hail from the minority Zaydi branch of Shi'a Islam, which differs substantially from the "Twelver" form of Imami Shiism observed by Iran's rulers. This article aims to illustrate some key developments in Iranian attitudes toward Yemen in recent years.

Until early 2015, Iran, by and large, publicly denied any interference in the Yemeni conflict. For instance, in April, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abadollahian described the official position of the Islamic Republic as: "Iran is not interfering in Yemen at all and has no military forces or even military advisers for training affairs in Yemen. And what defense tactic the Yemenis adopt against the Saudi aggression is a completely internal issue" ([Press TV](#), April 17).

However, in recent months this stance has subtly changed, and—although the government continues to deny an official link—a number of Iranian officials have not only expressed solidarity, but also implied some form of an Iranian support for the Houthis. For example, a January 25, 2015 statement by the representative of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hojjal Eslam Ali Shirazi, is perhaps one of the strongest suggestions of cooperation with the Houthis by an Iranian official:

Years ago, Hezbollah in Lebanon was formed, followed in Iraq and Syria. Today in Yemen, too, we are witnessing the formation of Ansar Allah [the Houthis], and in the future, all of these groups will be to enter the battle field against the enemies of Islam and Muslims ([Defa Press](#), January 25).

Although Shirazi's statement did not explicitly say that Iran had supported the Houthis, his statement clearly opened the door to such an interpretation by comparing the group with overtly Iranian-backed and trained movements in Lebanon,

Iraq and Syria. His statement, however, came just days after fighting in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, led to a victory by the Houthi rebels and forced the internationally-recognized administration of Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi to flee to the southern city of Aden. Shirazi's remarks may have been an attempt to take credit for this development, whether deserved or not ([Al-Monitor](#), January 22). Similarly, Brigadier General Ismail Qaani, the Quds Force deputy commander, gave a speech in May describing the Houthis as an Iranian ally, although again providing no specifics of what form this alliance actually takes, a formulation that allows Iran to receive the credit for the Houthis' expansion without necessarily taking full responsibility ([al-Arabiya](#), May 24).

Similarly, Iranian statements on Yemen show that motivations for declaring support for the Houthis vary. For example, in June 2015, Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Taskhiri, a high-ranking Shi'a cleric in Qom, described the Houthis' victory as a step towards destroying what he described as an al-Qaeda-Saudi alliance ([IRNA](#), June 7). On the other hand, Ali Mosavi Nejad, a conservative Iranian analyst, has described the Houthis as playing an integral role in advancing the Shi'a cause in the region, while even suggesting that the Yemenis and the Iranians maintain historic ties that date back centuries ([Hawzanews](#), April 22). In other instances, religious and messianic elements play a key role. For instance, on many popular media and blogs, rumors of the Mahdi's return from Yemen are abundant. [1] The most quoted saying in this regard comes from the late Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Behjat (1915-2009), who reportedly called on Shi'as to pay attention to Yemen; he said a spark will come from that country that signals the return of the Lord of Time (Sahib az Zaman), even though an official website run by his followers has issued a denial of such predictions ([Elyaselays.blogfa.com](#), January 21). [2] While it is highly unlikely that such messianic fervor is playing any significant role in Iran's policy decisions, popular beliefs may encourage Iranian officials to publically talk about Yemen because they know that this plays well with their domestic religious base.

In the same way, Hezbollah of Lebanon has also sought to suggest that it has also assisted the Houthis. For instance, *al-Akhbar*, a newspaper close to Hezbollah, has reported that the Houthis had acquired anti-aircraft missiles and rockets from the Lebanese group, including Fajr 5 artillery rockets supplied by Iran to Hezbollah forces in 2006 ([Shi'a News](#), June 13). Similarly, Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, has praised the Houthis military advances against the Saudis ([Sarbazgomnam08.ir](#), April 18; [Shi'a News](#), June 13). At the same time, however, it is likely that such claims and expressions of support are at least partly aimed at shoring up Hezbollah's domestic Shi'a support-base in Lebanon,

rather than necessarily always indicating Hezbollah's material support for the Houthi movement.

In terms of the Houthis' actual relations and links with Iran, much remains unclear. On one hand, Iran's official media has suggested that the Houthis' relations with Iran goes back to the early 1990s when Hussein al-Houthi, the founder of the movement, publically expressed admiration for Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian revolution (*Fars News*, June 4, 2013). Indeed, there is some evidence that the Houthis have admired the Islamic Republic and sought to establish close ties in order to participate in broader pan-Shi'a regional politics. Religious contact between Houthis and Iran have also expanded a distinct Shi'a transitional network, with Qom as the Shi'a cultural and learning center. [3] However, the actual scope of Iranian Imami religious influence on the Zaydi Houthis remains unclear. Moreover, there is no evidence that the IRGC has command and control over the Houthis, and its interaction appears limited to advising, training and supply of weapons.

Sunni Arab states may be right to suspect that Iran is materially backing the Houthis, given Iran's consistent promotion of what it sees as Shi'a interests in the region since the 1979 revolution, though this has still been dependent on political factors on the ground and the extent to which Iran can enhance its sphere of influence via such interventions. Iran's intentions in supporting the Houthis are likely twofold: first, in the hope that Yemen could provide an alternative ally if Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria crumbles, and secondly, the geo-strategic position of Yemen could provide a base for Iran to pressure and contain Saudi and Salafist influence in the Arabian Peninsula. Despite this, Yemen remains a low priority for Iran, especially compared to Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, countries in which Iran has invested major economic, military and political capital throughout the last decade. In this context, comments by Iranian officials in support of the Houthis should generally be understood as more rhetorical than substantial, and yet these statements reflect a confrontational stance that fuels tension in a region already embroiled in conflict.

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Notes

1. In Shi'a eschatology, the Mahdi (or the "guided one") is a messianic figure who will return at the end of time, before the Day of Judgement, in order to bring justice back to

earth. According to Twelver Shi'as, the Mahdi, or Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi, is the twelfth imam, who went into occultation in 873-874, and his reappearance will be signaled by prophetic signs such as natural disasters or major conflicts.

2. The official site of Ayatollah Behjat has denied such rumors. One example of this was posted on March 29, 2015 at <http://shayeaa.ir/post/206>.

3. See a translation of an interview with Zaydi cleric Issam al-Imad from September 28, 2009 at <http://mesi.org.uk/ViewNews.aspx?ArticleId=3442>.

Growing Islamic State Influence in Pakistan Fuels Sectarian Violence

Animesh Roul

A seemingly organized sectarian violence against Pakistan's beleaguered minority Shi'a community has plumbed new depths in recent months with a series of bombings of Shi'a worshipping places and targeted killings that have left over 170 people dead so far in 2015. Previously the anti-Shi'a armed campaign was spearheaded by banned Sunni militant groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba, Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LeJ) and Jundallah, which all are closely affiliated with Taliban conglomerate the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP—the Pakistani Taliban). However, with the arrival of Islamic State in Pakistan's jihadist landscape, there has been a spike in the volume of anti-Shi'a violence, partly as a result of *tafkiri* jihadi groups like LeJ or Jundallah entering into alliance with the strongly anti-Shi'a Islamic State.

The scale of anti-Shi'a attacks in recent years can be judged from a study by the Islamabad-based Jinnah Institute, which found that a total of 1,905 people from the country's Shi'a community, including from the Hazara and Ismaili subjects, died either in bomb blasts or targeted gun attacks from 2012 up until May 2015 ([Press TV](#), June 6). [1] At least three incidents of 2015 prove this disturbing trend. On January 30, a suicide bombing struck the Shi'a Karbala-e-Maula mosque (a.k.a. Karbala Imambargah—a Shi'a prayer hall) situated in the Shikarpur district of Sindh, killing more than 60 people ([Express Tribune](#), January 30). Two weeks later, on February 13, another anti-Shi'a attack involving gunmen and suicide bombers took place in Hayatabad in Peshawar, killing 21 Shi'a while they were offering Friday prayers ([Dawn](#) [Karachi], February 14). Exactly three months later, over 40 Ismaili Shi'as were killed when armed militants opened fire on a bus on May 13 in Gulshan-e-Iqbal in Karachi ([Dawn](#) [Karachi], May 14).

Most of these anti-Shi'a attacks were claimed by Jundallah, a splinter group of TTP that is now aligned with Islamic State. After the Sindh attack, its spokesperson Ahmed (Fahad) Marwat said: "Our target was the Shi'a community mosque... they are our enemies" ([Reuters](#), January 30). The group also claimed responsibilities for the May 13 bus attacks, although an English pamphlet was found at the crime scene; it was titled "Advent of the Islamic State," and contained messages such as "O soldier of *rawafidh* [rejectionist, meaning Shi'a] and *taaghut* [oppressors]! We swear that we will continue to make you and your family shed tears of blood and will not rest until we rid this land of your filthy existence

and implement the Shari'a on it" ([The Nation](#), May 14). A statement purportedly by the Islamic State's Pakistan chapter (Wilayat Khurasan) was also published on Twitter, claiming responsibility for the Safora Bus attack, stating: "Thanks to God, 43 apostates were killed, and close to 30 others were wounded in an attack by the soldiers of Islamic State on a bus carrying people of the Shi'a Ismaili sect in Karachi" ([Reuters](#), May 13). In addition, Jundallah spokesperson Marwat said in a media statement that "these people were Ismaili, and we consider them *kafir* [infidels]. We had four attackers. In the coming days, we will attack Ismailis, Shi'ites and Christians." Marwat had previously said that the Islamic State is like a brother to Jundallah and that "whatever plan they [the Islamic State] have, we will support them" ([Express Tribune](#), November 18, 2014).

Jundallah's support for the Islamic State, and particularly for its anti-Shi'a ideals, underline that Pakistan is a conducive environment for such ideologies, given decades of sectarian tensions in the country and the fact that anti-Shi'a invectives enjoy substantial patronage from mainstream religious organizations and political parties, even though Shi'as remain influential in many areas of Pakistani politics and society. Indeed, it is largely due to this sectarian environment that the Islamic State's ideals, and especially their contention that Shi'as are not Muslims, has found more traction in Pakistan than anywhere in the Indian subcontinent.

The attacks also underline the growing influence of the Islamic State on Jundallah, which pledged support to the Islamic State in November 2014 following a reported meeting in Saudi Arabia with an Islamic State delegation led by Zubair al-Kuwaiti ([Express Tribune](#), November 18, 2014). This high profile delegation also included Islamic State members Fahim Ansari and Shaykh Yusuf, from Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia respectively. Jundallah is likely to be partly comprised of cadres from banned sectarian Deobandi *tafkiri* groups like LeJ or Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jamat (ASWJ), which consider Shi'a Muslims to be *kafirs*, underlining that the group already had strong sectarian leanings even before the advent of the Islamic State. Indeed, in the past, ASWJ, which is a front group of the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), openly declared war against Shi'as and Sunni Barelvis (Sufis), both of whom it has regularly described as being non-Muslim, as well as also targeting other "non-Islamic" entities such as the Pakistani Army, media outlets and the country's Christian community. [2] Like ASWJ, the TTP has also previously declared war against Shi'as. As a result of these factors, it was natural that the Islamic State's campaign against Shi'as would easily find sympathizers or supporters among groups such as Jundallah and the TPP.

One striking aspect of these group's targeting of Pakistani Shi'as is that militants often target Shi'a worshipping places (Imambargah) during prayers in order to maximize fatalities and to emphasize the religious dimensions of their attack. For instance, so far this year, at least five Imambargahs have been targeted, including Aun o Muhammad Rizvi in Rawalpindi on January 9, Karbala-e-Maula Imambargah in Shikarpur on January 30, Imamia Masjid in Peshawar on February 13 and the Qasr-e-Sakina Imambargah in Rawalpindi on February 18. The geographic location of these attacks is also significant, showing that anti-Shi'a attacks in Pakistan have spread in recent months beyond traditional sectarian flashpoint locations in Karachi (Sindh) and Quetta (Balochistan) to a range of areas such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (e.g., Peshawar, Hangu), Punjab (e.g., Islamabad and Rawalpindi) and FATA (e.g., Kurram Agency) where sectarian violence was previously less common.

The increase in anti-Shi'a violence in Pakistan also has broader security implications as it signals the Islamic State's growing influence over like-minded militant groups, even as the Pakistani government has continued to deny the presence of the Islamic State in the country. Moreover, even though LeJ or Jundallah militants are carrying out attacks for the Islamic State as local collaborators, both for domestic clout and to remain relevant in the fast-changing global jihadist landscape, rather than as official subsidiaries of the group, these developments nonetheless show that the Islamic State brand has arrived in Pakistan, reinvigorating jihadist groups and stoking increased sectarian violence.

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Notes

1. "Violence Against the Shi'a Community in Pakistan 2012 – 2015," <http://jinnah-institute.org/violence-against-the-shi'a-community-in-pakistan-2012-2015/>.
2. "ASWJ-TTP's threatening handbills against Pakistan army, media, Christians, Shi'as and Sunni Barelvis," March 7, 2015, <https://lubpak.com/archives/333299>.

Conflict at a Crossroads: Can Nigeria Sustain Its Military Campaign Against Boko Haram?

Andrew McGregor

Expectations that the election of new Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari would lead to effective military measures against northeast Nigeria's Boko Haram militants have been dashed in recent weeks as the terrorist group carried out strikes on Chad and Niger, in addition to an intensified campaign of suicide bombings within Nigeria.

Buhari, who once served as the military governor of Borno State, the region most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, is determined to open the troubled Lake Chad region, the focus of the militants' recent activities, up to oil exploration, but this requires a stable environment in the region first (*Vanguard* [Lagos], April 20). Buhari led a lightning strike against Chad in 1983 on several Lake Chad islands whose sovereignty was disputed by Nigeria, but did so without the authorization of civilian president Shehu Shagari. [1]

In the meantime, the newly elected president used his first trips abroad as president to visit his counterparts in Niger and Chad, a clear sign that Buhari intends to make a break from the relatively uncooperative approach of ex-President Goodluck Jonathan that helped breed distrust and even personal animosity among the region's leaders. Talks were focused on security issues and the necessity of improving cooperation in this area.

Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau meanwhile, in March, pledged his movement's allegiance to the Islamic State at the same time that Boko Haram was suffering serious reverses on the battlefield due to an infusion of new weapons and foreign military trainers in the lead-up to Nigerian elections. The movement now uses the official name Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (*Independent*, April 26).

Problems of the Nigerian Military Inherited by President Buhari

Most of the fighting in the last two years has been carried out by the Nigerian Army's 7th Division, specifically created from three armored brigades in August 2013 for use against Boko Haram and headquartered in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. The 7th Division replaced the multi-service Joint Task Force (JTF), which had been criticized for its indifference to civilian casualties in the battle against Boko

Haram. However, certain problems have remained endemic to the Nigerian military, including:

- Poor air-ground operational coordination; air assets routinely fail to provide battlefield support;
- Demoralization to the point of mutiny in some units, often linked to insufficient training and a failure to pay salaries;
- Failure to keep Nigerian arms, ammunition and armored vehicles out of the hands of militants;
- Poor leadership that blames undertrained and under-equipped troops for their failure;
- Rampant corruption, even leading to battlefield shortages of arms and ammunition despite one of the largest defense budgets in sub-Saharan Africa, and political indifference. Ethnic rivalries also persist in the officer corps;
- Inferior logistics, an inability to maintain or at times operate complex equipment and a slow medical response on the battlefield;
- Indifference to civilian lives or human rights issues, a reliance on civilian vigilante groups and the penetration of the intelligence services by militants;
- Poor intelligence work, based partly on poor relations with local groups;
- A generally compliant media that encourages false confidence in the military;
- Unwillingness to cooperate in the field with regional allies, who are generally regarded by the Nigerian military as junior partners regardless of the reality on the ground.

While Chadian and Nigérien forces made substantial gains against Boko Haram earlier this year, there were still complaints that Nigeria was preventing hot pursuits of retreating militants that would have ultimately resulted in their destruction (*Vanguard* [Lagos], June 11). However, with President Jonathan in a tight race for reelection, the Boko Haram fight took on a new urgency, with Jonathan's administration turning to Eastern European mercenaries to improve air-ground coordination and South African private military contractors to provide training in new weapons and tactics. The latter contractors were part of a company known as Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection (STTEP), headed by Colonel Eeben Barlow, a widely-known private military contractor and former commander of the South African Defense Force's 32 Battalion. STTEP concentrated on creating a mobile Nigerian strike force "with its own organic air support, intelligence, communications, logistics and other relevant combat support elements." [2] During their three-month contract, Barlow's tactical approach, known as "relentless offensive action," helped

reverse recent gains by Boko Haram. Unfortunately, these gains appear to be in remission following the departure of the South Africans in late March.

In an effort to maintain the momentum, Buhari used his May 29 inauguration speech to announce he was shifting the command center for military operations against Boko Haram from Abuja (the Nigerian capital) to Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State and a frequent target for Boko Haram attacks since the election (*Vanguard* [Lagos], June 5).

Post-Election Attacks

Following the elections, Boko Haram launched an offensive using terrorist tactics almost immediately after Buhari took power. Since then, the group has also responded to increasing military pressure by shifting away from trying to occupy a "caliphate" in the Borno/Yobe/Adamawa States region of northeast Nigeria to the renewed use of terrorist methods, such as slaying inhabitants of defenseless villages in raids and hitting urban centers with suicide bombers targeting concentrations of people at markets, checkpoints and weddings. As well as mass raids on Maiduguri, Boko Haram has expanded its suicide bombings to the previously untouched city of Yola, the capital of Adamawa State (*Vanguard* [Lagos], June 5; *Daily Trust* [Lagos], June 6).

A Regional Solution: Reviving the Multi-National Joint Task Force

Though the Nigerian security forces found themselves hard-pressed after Buhari's election, on a larger scale, there were signs that Boko Haram's regional opponents were now ready to work out a common strategy through the revitalization of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), an anti-terrorist alliance of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon, with a non-military representation from Benin. The move promised to reverse the isolated efforts of alliance members during the Jonathan regime, with Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno complaining that, two months into the war, Chad's military still had insufficient contact with the Nigerian military: "The Nigerian Army and the Chadian Army are working separately in the field. They are not undertaking joint operations. If they were [carrying out] joint operations probably they would have achieved more results" (*Punch*, [Lagos], June 9).

Participating nations will begin deploying troops to the MNJTF on July 30, 2015. The force has a planned strength of 8,700 personnel while its operational zone will be split into three sectors. Each contributing nation will be responsible for equipping and maintaining their own units (*Vanguard*

[Lagos], June 11). The post of MNJTF commander will be filled by a Nigerian until the end of the conflict with Boko Haram (a point Buhari insisted upon), while a Cameroonian will hold the post of deputy force commander and a Chadian will be the chief-of-staff. The latter two positions will rotate every 12 months. The task force's headquarters will be located in N'Djamena, the Chadian capital and headquarters for France's African security operations known as Operation Barkhane (*Punch* [Lagos], June 11; for Operation Barkhane, see *Terrorism Monitor*, July 24, 2014).

The first MNJTF commander is Major General Tukur Yusuf Buratai, whose most notable former posting was as the commander of Joint Task Force, Operation Pulo Shield, which targeted oil thieves and pirates in the Niger Delta region (*Daily Post* [Lagos], June 3). General Buratai may have a personal interest in destroying Boko Haram; while he was away commanding Joint Task Force operations in the southern Niger Delta in 2014, his large Borno State home was attacked and burned by Boko Haram militants, who also killed one guard (*Premium Times* [Abuja], February 20). Under President Jonathan, Nigeria pledged to cover the main cost of funding the MNJTF, a pledge President Buhari renewed in June with an offer of \$100 million (*Vanguard* [Lagos], June 11; *This Day* [Lagos], June 11).

Nigeria's Demoralized Army

Poor morale has inhibited a strong Nigerian military response to Boko Haram. In late May, some 200 Nigerian soldiers were dismissed from service for cowardice, with many likely relating to the fall of the town of Mubi (Adamawa State) to Boko Haram in late October 2014. Troops in Mubi bolted for the state capital of Yola when Boko Haram attacked, and Nigerian authorities claimed to have "video evidence of their cowardice" (*This Day* [Lagos], May 28; *Premium Times* [Abuja], October 29, 2014). One of the dismissed soldiers claimed that they had only followed orders from their officers to withdraw from Mubi due to inadequate weapons (*This Day* [Lagos], May 28). Another sacked soldier claimed troops were given only five bullets each as well as expired bombs made in 1964. The troops' heaviest weapons only had a range of 400 meters while they were facing militants using anti-aircraft weapons with a range of over 1,000 meters (*Vanguard* [Lagos], May 28; *This Day* [Lagos], May 28).

As of May 21, Nigerian military authorities were able to confirm that no less than 579 officers and soldiers were facing courts martial in Abuja and Lagos for offenses including indiscipline, refusal to obey orders, insubordination and cowardice (*This Day* [Lagos], May 21). Sixty-six other soldiers have already been condemned to death for mutiny

and their failure to confront Boko Haram, though these sentences might be revisited by the new president.

New Equipment to Turn the Tide

Nigerian Ambassador to the United States Adebowale Adefuye expressed his government's displeasure with what they perceived as the United States' unwillingness to support the struggle against Boko Haram or provide lethal military equipment based on "rumors, hearsays and exaggerated accounts" of human rights abuses by Nigerian forces in Borno (*Punch* [Lagos], November 13, 2014). After Nigeria's attempt last year to purchase U.S.-made Bell AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters from Israel (which had replaced their Cobra fleet with newer AH-64 Apache helicopters) was blocked by the United States, which retains control over resale of such equipment, Nigeria turned to other suppliers for its needs:

- Nigeria began to deploy newly acquired French-made Aérospatiale Gazelle attack helicopters in February, though it was unclear how many were purchased or from whom (*DefenceWeb*, March 16). What was clear, however, was that the helicopters were flown at first by foreign military contractors in support of operations carried out by Nigeria's 72 Strike Force in Borno State;
- Two Eurocopter AS-332 Super Puma helicopters in storage since 1997 are being refurbished and upgraded by Eurocopter Romania. One of two existing Nigerian Super Puma helicopters was lost in a crash in Lagos on April 11 (*This Day* [Lagos], April 11);
- Nigeria's air force will reportedly soon deploy Russian-made attack helicopters ordered in August 2014 (*DefenceWeb*, March 16). The new acquisitions include six Mi-35 (NATO reporting name "Hind-E"), an updated export version of the well-known Mi-24 (NATO reporting name "Hind") designed for harsh climates. Besides its attack capabilities, the Mi-35 can also act as a transport, carrying eight fully equipped soldiers. Nigeria is also obtaining twelve Mi-17Sh (NATO reporting name "Hip") helicopters, an export version of the multi-purpose transport/gunship Mi-17;
- Nigeria appears to be using five Chinese-made CASC CH-3 Rainbow UAV's in combat missions against Boko Haram. A photo of one such craft downed in Borno State in January shows the drone is equipped with a variety of missiles, most likely YC-200 guided bombs and AR-1 air-to-ground missiles; [3]
- The United States has also permitted the sale of two Dassault/Dornier Alpha light attack/trainer jets to help replace losses (*DefenceWeb*, March 30; May 26).

Training on the new equipment, especially helicopter gunships and armored vehicles, was provided in part by South African private military contractors (BBC, March 13). Both air and land forces are being upgraded with night vision equipment.

Nigeria has also embarked on a major arms acquisition program that includes procuring 16 T-72 tanks and rocket launchers from the Czech Republic and armored personnel carriers from Ukraine, China, South Africa and Canada to provide greater battlefield mobility, firepower and security. Buhari's election has also allowed the United States to reappraise its relations with Nigeria, deeply strained by the corruption and human rights abuses of the Jonathan regime (Reuters, June 5).

Regional Dimensions of the Conflict

Boko Haram is now targeting Chadian and Nigérien communities in response to the participation of these nations in the anti-Boko Haram military coalition. On June 18, militants crossed the border from Borno into the Diffa region of Niger, where they slaughtered at least 38 people, mostly women and children (AFP, June 19). Only days earlier, motorcycle-riding suicide bombers struck a police training college and the central police station in the Chadian capital of N'Djamena on June 15, killing 27 people. Boko Haram's message was clear: despite Chad's military offensive against the group, the group remained capable of striking the city, which serves as headquarters for the revamped MNJTF and France's counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane (Reuters, June 15).

Vowing that "spilling the blood of Chadians will not go unpunished," Chad's air force claimed to have carried out airstrikes on six Boko Haram bases in Nigeria in retribution (Reuters, June 18). However, these claims were quickly rejected by Nigeria's military, which insisted the air strikes must have been carried out in Niger. The inability of Nigeria and Chad to even agree on where air strikes were carried out demonstrates that cooperation is still in short supply. The somewhat testy statement issued by Nigerian Director of Defense Information Major General Chris Olukolade spoke to continued resentment of the military coalition among Nigeria's military leadership: "Although the terms of the multilateral and bilateral understanding with partners in the war against terror allow some degree of hot pursuit against the terrorists, the territory of Nigeria has not been violated as insinuated in the reports circulated in some foreign media" (Premium Times [Abuja], June 18). Other measures announced by Chadian authorities included a round-up of foreigners and bans on the *burqa* and *niqab* (Nigerian

Guardian [Lagos], June 20).

In addition, recognizing that underlying the Boko Haram rebellion is the extreme poverty of northeast Nigeria and neighboring regions around Lake Chad, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (consisting of Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon) is implementing an emergency \$65 million development initiative in the region to "combat the causes and conditions that favor the development of insecurity" (*Vanguard* [Lagos], June 11).

Conclusion

Part of the reason the Nigerian military has had difficulty in establishing firepower superiority against the insurgents is that most of Boko Haram's military equipment has been seized from Nigerian Army stocks, leaving both sides similarly equipped in terms of weapons. The Nigerian military must thus use the other advantages available to state actors, such as effective use of airpower, organized supply systems, troop rotation and employment of foreign technical experts where necessary.

Nigeria's counter-insurgency efforts seem to have improved, notably through greater use of small numbers of better-trained Special Forces personnel rather than the deployment of large numbers of poorly-trained and poorly-equipped regular army personnel on the frontline. However, the inability of Nigeria's security forces to prevent or even stem the growth of urban terrorism in the northeast speaks to the continued failure of Nigerian intelligence services to gather actionable intelligence in the region.

At the moment, Nigerian Special Forces personnel and Air Force assets appear to be leading the effort to clear Boko Haram from their bases in the Sambisa Forest. Losses are reportedly heavy (precise figures are hard to come by), and there are still problems in the supply chain, with troops in the field going for days with little water or food (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], June 6). However, new weapons and tactics will inevitably prove to be only part of a more comprehensive military and economic solution to Nigeria's expanding Boko Haram insurgency. President Buhari's new administration can either exploit the renewed goodwill it has encountered from the United States and an eagerness amongst its regional military partners for greater military and economic cooperation, or it can fall back into the familiar patterns of negligence and corruption that have so hampered the struggle against Boko Haram. In this sense, the crisis in the Lake Chad region has reached a crossroads for the Nigerian government.

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Notes

1. See Jack Murphy, "Eeben Barlow Speaks Out (Pt. 2): Development of a Nigerian Strike Force," April 6, 2015, <http://sofrep.com/40623/eeben-barlow-speaks-pt-2-development-nigerian-strike-force/>.
2. See Adeoye A. Akinsanya and John A. Ayoade, *An Introduction to Political Science in Nigeria*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, p. 272; Adekeye Adebajo, *Liberia's Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG, and Regional Security in West Africa*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002
3. See <http://www.airforceworld.com/blog/ch3-uav-drone-crashed-in-nigeria/>.