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The Islamic State's Shari'a court in Derna, Libya was burned in an uprising against the group. (Source: Twitter)

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EGYPTIAN ARMY'S KILLING OF TOURISTS HIGHLIGHTS WESTERN DESERT THREAT

James Brandon

The Egyptian military, on September 15, killed 12 civilians, including at least two Mexican tourists, in an attack on a tourist convoy in the country's Western Desert (*al-Ahram*, September 14). According to reports from survivors, the group of 22—who were traveling off-road in four vehicles—were attacked by aircraft and helicopters when they stopped for a break at midday near the al-Wahat area (al-Jazeera, September 15). Details remain confused, with the Egyptian government initially claiming that the tourists did not have the required permit and were traveling in a "restricted zone" at night, although this later was proven incorrect and the tour group appears to have even had a police escort at the time of the attack (al-Bawaba, September 14). The military's heavy-handed attack, however, aptly illustrates increasing official fears about a growing militant presence along the country's 700-mile border with Libya, where a range of a Islamist militant groups, including offshoot of the global Islamic State group, remain active.

Just two days before the attack on the tourists, the Egyptian wing of the Islamic State, issued a statement on Twitter, claiming to have clashed with Egyptian soldiers in the Western Desert and to have additionally beheaded an alleged spy for the Egyptian government. According to the statement, the "soldiers of the caliphate" had attacked Egyptian military forces with light and medium weapons, including RPGs, allegedly leading to the government troops "fleeing and dragging their tails in defeat" (SITE, September 13). The largest militant attack in the region to date occurred in July 2014, when around 20 militants attacked an army checkpoint near Farafra Oasis, approximately midway between the Libyan border and the Nile Valley (Mada Masr, July 20, 2014). Previously, in August 2014, the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis group, a Sinai-based militant

organization now affiliated with the Islamic State and known as Wilayat Sinai, shot dead a U.S. oil worker near Karama, on the eastern edge of the Western Desert (*al-Ahram*, December 1, 2014).

Egypt's Western Desert is extremely sparsely populated, even so more the country's Sinai region, where a significant Islamist militant uprising is also underway, and the local population is concentrated along the coast and a several small oasis settlements, often widely separated by tracts of high, inhospitable desert. Nevertheless, the Western Desert region's small settlements have historically been hubs of illegal trading, often facilitated by strong tribal networks, such as the Awlad Ali tribe, whose historic territory straddles the Libyan and Egyptian border, and a limited police presence. Siwa Oasis, for instance, is a long-standing hub for arms-smuggling operations between Libya and Egypt, as is the coastal city of Mersa Matruh (*Youm7*, June 1, 2013). Although not widely publicized compared to similar operations in Sinai, military efforts to combat both arms smuggling and potential militant infiltration in the region have been ongoing for some time. For instance, in mid-August, the military destroyed five alleged militant vehicles southeast of Siwa and captured five others; a military aircraft also crashed during the operation, killing its four-man crew (Daily News Egypt, August 14).

Notwithstanding the latest incident, Egyptian efforts to secure the Libyan frontier are likely to rely on such air and ground interdictions rather than, for instance, building a permanent fence or barrier across the border, which would be prohibitively expensive to construct, maintain and police. In light of this, further incidents in the region, both Egyptian Army actions against militants and potential militant attacks in the region on both civilian and governmental infrastructure, should be expected.

KURDISH MILITANTS INCREASE ATTACKS IN IRAN

James Brandon

The last few weeks have seen a significant increase in attacks in Iran by the secular-leftist Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê—PJAK), the most significant Kurdish militant group in Iran, which is an affiliate of the Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—PKK) and is based alongside the PKK in

Iraqi Kurdistan. In the most notable incident, on August 6, PJAK attacked military installations in the Iranian town of Marivan, near the Iraqi border, claiming to have killed 20 Iranian troops in the operation (Rudaw, August 7). The Iranian government confirmed the attack, but did not provide details on the casualties (IRNA, August 10). A statement issued by PJAK, which particularly referenced Iran's recent execution of a young Kurdish man for allegedly supporting the group, said that "the Kurdish people do no more accept the occupation and cruelty imposed on them, nor do they leave the attacks of the enemies unanswered" (ANF News, August 26). In response to this and other attacks, Iran has stepped up its own operations in the region. For instance, on August 31, an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander said that his forces had attacked PJAK forces, "killing a number" of fighters near the Kurdish-majority town of Javanrud, with one Iranian soldier being killed in the fighting (Rudaw, September 1).

The PJAK attacks occur in the context of rising Kurdish national consciousness across the region, evidenced by the creation of an effectively autonomous Kurdish zone in Syria and by an ongoing wave of Kurdish protests and militant violence in Turkey. Kurds make up around ten percent of Iran's population, and to head off this threat of rising Kurdish nationalism, the Iranian government has in recent weeks begun pursued a carrot and stick policy towards its Kurdish minority; cracking down on Kurdish militants, while offering social and economic incentives to the broader Kurdish population.

As part of the "carrot" approach, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani made his first official visit to Iran's Kurdistan region in July, visiting the region's capital of Sanandaj. In a series of speeches there, Rouhani promised economic and infrastructural development (specifically the building of new dams and roads). He also stressed Iran's alleged emphasis on religious equality ("Sunni and Shiite are all brothers, we are all equal") and flattered the locals, paying tribute to "the importance of Kurdistan and its people during the Islamic Revolution and their role in protecting Iran" (Rudaw, July 26). Also in July, Tehran lifted a ban on the teaching of the Kurdish language at Iranian universities and the use of Kurdish in the media, two standing demands of many Iranian Kurds (PressTV, July 27). In a further apparent nod to Kurdish feelings, Iran also appointed a Kurdish scholar, Dr. Saleh Adebi, as ambassador to Cambodia and Vietnam; he is reportedly Iran's first Sunni Kurdish ambassador (Shafaq, September 3). While many of these gestures are driven by a desire to placate Kurdish feelings, they are also driven by conventional politics: Rouhani received a large number of Kurdish votes in the 2013 presidential election.

At the same time as making such concessions, however, Iran has continued to crack down heavily on Kurdish separatism and militancy. For instance, Behrouz Alkhani, an imprisoned Kurdish activist, was executed by the authorities on August 26, for "effective collaboration" with PJAK and for "enmity against God" (a.k.a. the Iranian government) (Kurdistan Press Agency, August 26). This followed the execution of another Kurdish political prisoner, Sirwan Nejavi, on August 9 (RojiKurd, August 14).

PJAK activism and militancy in Iran is likely to be temporarily constrained by the involvement of the PKK, its much larger and more powerful partner organization, in ongoing fighting in Syria, Turkey and Iraq, and by PJAK's relative weakness in Iran; Iraqi Kurdish authorities also disprove as they do not want to see their good relations with Iran jeopardized by PJAK attacks on it. Moreover, Iran's recent concessions to Kurdish feelings, combined with its crackdown on Kurdish militants, may help to partly quell insurrectionary sentiments among Kurds in the short term. In the longer term, however, it seems highly unlikely that Iran will be able to entirely ride out the ongoing wave of Kurdish nationalism, confidence and self-assertiveness that is washing over the region, whether this is expressed through PJAK itself or through other groups that may yet emerge.

The Gloves Come Off: The Dutch Response to Jihadists in Syria and Iraq

Anno Bunnik and Thomas de Zoete

In December 2014, a video testament emerged in which 19-year-old Sultan Berzel, from the Netherlands' southern city of Maastricht, called on Muslims to make *hijra* (a religious migration) to the self-proclaimed Islamic State group. He delivered his message in a quiet voice and with a local Maastricht accent. The video, however, ended with the message that Berzel, a.k.a. "Abu Abdullah al-Hollandi," had carried out a suicide bombing at a police office near the Iraqi capital Baghdad, killing over 20 officers.

Earlier that year, the Netherlands' public got a first glimpse of the Dutch jihadists in Syria through an interview with Omar Yilmaz, a Dutch citizen of Turkish descent, on the current affairs TV show *Nieuwsuur*. [1] Yilmaz stood out as a highly charismatic character who argued that his sole reason for traveling to Syria was to help the suffering Syrian people. He also made the case that Western inaction essentially forced him to act, a rationale given by many of the European fighters who traveled to Syria in 2012 and 2013. By emphasizing how much he missed a specific Dutch snack, he became even more likable to a wider public. A year or so later, however, evidence emerged that Yilmaz had joined the Islamic State (*De Telegraaf*, September 4).

The cases of Berzel and Yilmaz perhaps elucidate the variety of Dutch jihadists. Yilmaz was a former Dutch soldier and traveled to Syria in the early days of the civil war. By contrast, Berzel arrived after the Islamic State had declared a caliphate and committed his martyrdom operation within months of arrival. Some estimates of the numbers of people who are thought to have traveled to Syria and Iraq:

- 200 Dutch jihadists have traveled to Syria or Iraq, of which 32 are confirmed dead;
- Most joined the Islamic State; relatively few joined Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's official affiliate in the region, and other groups;
- Over 35 women have made the journey, with most based in Raqqa, the Islamic State's self-proclaimed capital;
- At least 3 individuals are known to have committed suicide attacks in Syria or Iraq;
- Around 35 have returned to the Netherlands. [2]

The cases of Yilmaz and Berzel illustrate that Dutch jihadists are not afraid to reach out to Muslims back home, and even to the wider public. This contrasts with countries like Belgium, where jihadists have been fairly quiet. [3] While this difference could simply reflect different national characters—Belgians are known to complain that Dutch are loud and arrogant—this development calls for a response by the Dutch authorities.

The 'Dutch Approach'

During the 1970s, some acts of politically motivated violence in the Netherlands—culminating in the infamous hostage taking of a whole train in 1977 by Moluccan youngsters—stood at the base of a policy framework that came to be known as the "Dutch approach": talking them down and out. [4] Through endless conversations the government tried to keep all (violent) parties aboard its democratic system, stressing that communication is more significant than any other form of response, such as a violent intervention. Much has changed since the seventies, but current Dutch counter-terrorism policy still values dialogue and communication as vital elements of a coherent strategy for defending a pluralist society.

But where Moluccan youths did not exclude themselves from the democratic system, today's jihadists fundamentally reject the Western state and its democratic legal order. And as jihadists focus on the power of the individual to act and/or decide whether violence is permissible and legitimate, unbound by any other community (or religious) authority, it is a valid question to what extent the Dutch approach can still work when its adversary does not want to join the conversation, does not recognize the state and its institutions and values actions over words. [5] For example, during a rally in The Hague in June 2014, for "Abou Yazied," who had been detained on suspicion of planning to travel to Syria for terrorist purposes, the main speaker—Abou Moussa—made very clear that "Democracy = hypocrisy," and that "Western civilization is like a Fata Morgana [mirage]. From a distance it looks promising, but from a closer look, it turns out to be nothing." [6]

The Gloves Come Off: An Integrated Approach to Jihadism

During the summer of 2014, the Dutch government's efforts to counter the threat from jihadists in a robust and proactive way were set out in a new comprehensive program of action called "An Integrated Approach to Jihadism." [7] This has three objectives: (1) protecting the Dutch democratic system and the rule of law, (2) combating and weakening the Dutch jihadist movement and (3) removing any breeding grounds for radicalization. It focuses both on individuals and on the Dutch jihadist movement as a whole by targeting hard-core jihadists with penal and administrative measures, and aims to prevent the growth of the movement by countering radicalization. The 38 measures listed in the program can be divided into five main categories: addressing the issue of jihadist travelers, travel interventions, tackling radicalization, social media and information-sharing and (international) cooperation. This approach may be familiar, but the integrated execution—prompted by pressure from top government officials—is new.

Three individual proposed measures particularly stand out: the proposals to take away Dutch citizenship without the need for a criminal conviction, to combat online dissemination of violent jihadist content and to record the travels of all Dutch citizens. However, after being heavily disputed on privacy grounds, the plan to keep travel records was shelved, but the proposal to refuse or declare Dutch passports and ID cards of potential Dutch jihadists invalid, to prevent them from traveling abroad, was recently agreed upon by the Dutch Council of Ministers. [8] [9]

Coming Home to Roost?

Considering these measures, the Dutch government has clearly chosen to take the offensive in combating the jihadist threat. Regarding its action program, it even speaks of "defending our legal order, through which our free society will prevail." [10] As has been said in the context of the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, Western governments have the clock, while jihadists have the time. Similarly, past evaluations of Dutch counter-terrorism policies have shown that—through electoral or budgetary reasons, or a false sense of "mission accomplished"—the threat tends to resurface again when it is ignored and deprioritized by the state. Symbolic of this was the decision by the Dutch Council of Ministers in 2012, to cut the budget of the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (Algemene Inlichtingen-en Veiligheidsdienst—AIVD) by one-third, at a time when the first signs that Dutch jihadists were gearing up for the armed struggle in Syria were already visible. The decision left deep scars in the AIVD, which will be felt for years, and threatens its desired intelligence position and its operational capacity to deal with the jihadist threat. [11]

Another challenge is the widespread sentiment that the government should not intervene if Dutch jihadists want to travel *to* (not from!) war zones. This opinion was voiced most notably by the Dutch-Moroccan mayor of Rotterdam, Achmed Aboutaleb: "If you do [not] like our freedom... sod off" (NOS, January 7). One less jihadist in the Netherlands

is one less threat to homeland security appears to be his reasoning. However, recent attacks in Australia and Canada have showed that if stopped at their borders, would-be jihadists are liable to turn against their own country and conduct domestic attacks (*Time*, September 24, 2014; CBC News, October 21, 2014). On the other hand, giving jihadists a free pass to commit war crimes in Syria and Iraq is a policy option clouded with moral ambiguity.

More problems arise with the reach of certain measures: although Dutch passports and ID cards can now be annulled, this does not seem to affect jihadists who have already traveled to Syria much. Some jihadists have burned their own European passports to emphasize that they do not recognize the nation-state system, and argue that there will be no borders when the caliphate is established across the globe, meaning that revoking their nationality will have little ideological impact on jihadists. Jihadists do not have to fear the Dutch government efforts to freeze financial assets either: investigations take months, and when Dutch jihadists return to the Netherlands, they can still legally sign on for Student Welfare. [12] Underlining the measures' relatively limited impact on committed jihadists, as Dutch Islamic State fighter Yilmaz said on his Tumblr page; "I have a home to go to and a wife to go to, so I consider myself a rich man yes :-) Alhamdulillah." [13]

Looking Ahead

Several Dutch jihadists have committed suicide attacks in Syria and Iraq instead of in the West. This signifies that jihadists from the Netherlands are already involved in an increasingly intertwined civil war in Syria and Iraq, and underlines that their operations currently primarily target the Islamic State's local and regional foes, not the country they grew up in. However, due to the complexity and unpredictability of the jihadist threat and its links with networks in Europe, this could change in time. Having come to this conclusion, the Dutch government has decided to take off their gloves and go on the offensive. The question remains, however, if such national solutions are sufficient to counter a global problem.

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Notes

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9. "Wijziging Paspoortwet maakt vervallen paspoort en identiteitskaart jihadgangers mogelijk," Rijksoverheid, September 4, 2015, https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2015/09/04/wijziging-paspoortwet-maakt-vervallen-paspoort-en-identiteitskaart-jihadgangers-mogelijk.

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Turkey's New Syria Policy: Preventing Islamic State and Kurdish Expansion

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

On June 16, the Kurdish militia group People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel—YPG) and its Free Syrian Army (FSA) allies captured the Islamic State-controlled Syrian town of Tal Abyad on the Turkish border (YPG Rojava, June 16). In addition, in May, a surprise offensive by the Islamic State threatened to cut off Arab Sunni rebels' primary supply route from Turkey to Aleppo by capturing Sawran (al-Mashdar, June 1). These developments forced Turkey to work more closely with the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition in order to contain both the YPG and jihadist group by attempting to create an "Islamic State-free zone" along its border. Turkey's goals are to prevent the creation of a viable autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria, and to save its favored Sunni rebel groups in Aleppo from the Islamic State. Turkey had already talked about creating such "safe havens" last October, but developments on the ground forced them to approach this more seriously (Anadolu Agency, October 16, 2014).

Changing Redlines: Kirkuk and Jarabulus

When the United States toppled the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in 2003, Turkey was afraid that Iraqi Kurds would annex Iraq's oil-rich city of Kirkuk, and use its oil to achieve independence. Now, however, Turkey is more afraid of the Syrian Kurds controlling the Syrian-Turkish border. As a result, the Turkish "red line" over Kirkuk has been replaced by a "red line" over Jarabulus, a Syrian town on the Turkish border at the heart of the proposed "safe haven." Furthermore, Turkey has also expressed its worries about Turkmen, a Turkic-origin ethnic group, in Syria, just as it has expressed its concern about Turkmen in Kirkuk.

Turkey had already expressed its opposition towards the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat—PYD) after its armed wing, the YPG, captured the majority of Kurdish-majority territories in Syria in July 2012. For instance, the advisor to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Yalcin Akdogan, wrote that new Qandils in northern Syria cannot be permitted, a reference to the Kurdistan Workers Party's (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—PKK) main bases in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq (Star Gazete [Istanbul], July 27, 2012). This underlines that for Turkey, there is no difference between the YPG, PYD

or the PKK. However, Turkey also misread events in Syria, and thought that the Syrian government would fall soon; Turkey also thought that Syrian rebels could finish off YPG afterwards.

Although Turkey saw the PYD as a threat, it did not interfere directly. Unlike in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish areas in Syria do not form a homogenous Kurdish-majority bloc, but are interspersed by mixed areas also inhabited by Arabs and Turkmen. The goal of the YPG is, however, to connect the three local administrations in the three Kurdish enclaves (Efrin, Kobane and Hasakah), and to create a contiguous Kurdish-controlled region (Al-Monitor, November 24, 2013). In 2013, however, this seemed an unlikely prospect, and Turkey was confident the YPG could not beat rival militant groups and successfully link these territories. However, this changed in September 2014, when the YPG became one of the main beneficiaries of Western airstrikes against the Islamic State, notably after the jihadists besieged Kobane, another Kurdish-majority town on the Syrian-Iraqi border.

YPG Advances Raise Alarm in Turkey

As a result of the above, Turkey was shocked when the YPG took the town of Tal Abyad in June, leading its government to conclude that ignoring Islamic State-controlled areas on Syria's Turkish border would enable the Kurds to take more territory. Among other things, Turkey was afraid that the YPG's fight against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq would increase their legitimacy, along with that of the PKK (*Daily Sabah*, September 12).

Furthermore, some circles in Turkey and even in Iran are afraid that the YPG, with the support of Western anti-Islamic State airstrikes, could create a corridor to the Mediterranean Sea (Yenisafak, July 16). Although, this seems far-fetched (Daily Sabah, June 25). Access to the sea would mean that the Kurds were not longer landlocked and would no long be forced to work with their neighbors. For instance, in July, pro-Turkish government newspaper columnist Kemal Ozturk wrote:

> [The] PYD wants to disintegrate the Syrian lands, which are placed throughout Turkey's northern borders, and establish an independent region that has a connection with the sea. This region, which will cut Turkey's connection with Syria and will be completely established out of Kurds, is also a candidate for transferring the Kurdish petrol in Northern Iraq (*Yenisafak*, July 18).

In order to prevent the YPG from taking more Islamic State-controlled territory with Western air support, Turkey decided to bolster its ties with the United States, and to attempt to create an Islamic State-free "safe zone" with Turkmen proxy groups and other groups, such as the mainly Arab Islamist militant Ahrar al-Sham organization. YPG's central commander in Efrin, Sipan Hemo, said "They just want to use Turcoman [Turkmen] as an excuse to establish a buffer zone around Jarabulus and prevent the unification of Kobane and Afrin cantons," (Civiroglu, August 4).

Accordingly, in the beginning of July, Turkey and the United States discussed a deal to allow the latter to use Turkish air bases to conduct operations against the Islamic State, which Turkey had previously refused (*Daily Sabah*, July 8). Turkey also made clear to the United States that they would not allow YPG to cross into Jarabulus, part of its intended "safe haven" (Yeni Safak, July 4).

Turkey Moves Against Islamic State, PKK and YPG

On July 20, a suspected Islamic State attack killed at least 32 people, mainly young Kurdish activists, in Suruc in eastern Turkey at an event for the rebuilding of Kobane (Anadolu Agency, July 23). The aim of the IS-attack was most likely to create conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government. The Islamic State's online magazine Dabiq, in mid-2015, also predicted an end of the peace between PKK and Turkey, and said this would further weaken the PKK in Syria, which is already facing recruitment problems. [1] Since the YPG is increasingly dependent on Kurdish volunteers from Turkey, a war between PKK and Turkey could create a manpower problem for the YPG in Syria. [2]

In response to the Suruc bombing, the PKK killed two Turkish policemen in revenge, blaming the government for the Islamic State's attack; the PKK, including senior leaders such as Cemil Bayik, have often accused Turkey of supporting the jihadist organization against the YPG (Hawar News, 21 June, 2015). Furthermore, a Turkish officer was killed in Kilis on July 23, by fire from Islamic State forces near the border, (Anadolu Agency, July 23).

Turkey responded by targeting the YPG, PKK and the Islamic State. It first targeted the YPG twice in the Syrian village of Zormikhar, close to Jarabulus, with heavy tank fire on July 24, and in the village of Tal Findere, as a warning to the YPG not to cross the river into Jarabulus (YPG Rojava, July 27). Furthermore, Turkey launched airstrikes against mostly PKK targets in northern Iraq, and also against a much smaller number of Islamic State targets (*Daily Sabah*, July 24). This has restarted the war between the PKK and

Turkey, ending a ceasefire that had been in place since 2012, as predicted by the Islamic State.

Following the Turkish airstrikes, the Syrian Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, on August 11, expressed support for a Turkish safe zone and Turkish operations against the PKK, while fighters from al-Qaeda's official affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra also withdrew from their frontline positions facing the Islamic State (*Daily Sabah*, August 11). This was followed by the Islamic State launching assaults on Marea, and issuing statements targeting Turkey (*Today's Zaman*, August 11; *Daily Sabah*, September 10). Fighting increased between the Islamic State and opposing rebel groups in the countryside of Aleppo, with coalition airstrikes supporting the anti-Islamic State rebels. However, all sides, including both a range of Islamist militias and the YPG, have presently reached a stalemate, making it unlikely the area between Azaz and Jarabulus will become a safe haven any time soon, meaning the Islamic State would remain in control of a border crossing with Turkey.

Conclusion

While Turkey initially calculated that Bashar al-Assad's government would fall quickly, and that the PYD and YPG could not maintain their advances, a few years later, Assad is still in power, and the YPG has increased their territorial control. As a result, Turkey has started to play a bigger role in the anti-Islamic State coalition in order to prevent the YPG from gaining more legitimacy and territory in the war against the jihadist organization, and to protect its preferred Arab Islamist rebels' supply lines from Aleppo to Turkey that are threatened by Islamic State advances. Turkey now hopes a future Islamic State-free safe haven in the vicinity of Jarabulus will prevent both YPG and the Islamic State from taking further advantage of the situation. As a result, more fighting between the Islamic State and rival rebel groups is likely in the coming months. Furthermore, the increasing urban warfare between the PKK and the Turkish state within Turkey will make it more difficult for the YPG to recruit Kurds from Turkey, which will limit their advances in Syria, including against the Islamic State.

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Notes

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2. The YPG official website shows that many of the recently killed YPG fighters are Kurds from Turkey. For instance, on July 13, the YPG announced the identities of 16 fallen YPG fighters, only two of whom were Kurds from Syria (YPG Rojava, July 13).

The Islamic State's Uneven Trajectory in Libya

Nathaniel Barr

As the Islamic State sought to expand geographically in the months following the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014, Libya initially appeared to be the organization's most promising frontier outside of Syria and Iraq. Libya's civil conflict—which has pitted the Libya Dawn military coalition, allied with the Tripoli-based General National Congress (one of Libya's two competing legislative bodies), against units aligned with the Libyan National Army, commanded by polarizing former Qaddafi military officer Khalifa Haftar and affiliated with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (Libya's internationally recognized parliamentary body)—had divided Libya geographically and sent the country spiraling into a state of chaos. The Islamic State quickly seized upon these anarchic conditions, establishing a presence in the eastern city of Derna in the fall of 2014, and then expanding into the central city of Sirte in February 2015. These bases in Derna and Sirte were critical to the group's organizational success, as they provided the organization with a springboard from which to expand into other parts of North Africa. Some supporters also saw the Islamic State's foothold on the southern shores of the Mediterranean as possible rear bases from which to launch attacks into Europe. [1]

But recent developments in Derna and Sirte have revealed the challenges that the Islamic State faces in trying to consolidate and expand its presence in Libya. In particular, the organization has struggled to harness and capitalize upon political grievances in Libya, a Sunni-majority country where religious sectarianism, an issue that the Islamic State has manipulated to great effect in Iraq, has only minimal resonance. At the same time, the group's heavy-handed governing style, its indiscriminate use of violence against Muslim civilians and its liberal application of *takfiri* doctrine (i.e., declaring a Muslim an apostate, an offense punishable by death) have alienated many Libyans and sparked resistance from Libya's tribes, who are perhaps the strongest social organizations remaining in Libya. The entrenched presence of al-Qaeda-linked militant groups in Libya has also constrained the Islamic State's expansion in the country, forcing the latter organization to fight its way to power against far more established, and in some cases popular, militias. Though the Islamic State will remain a potent player in Libya's fragmented security environment so long as the broader civil conflict in the country persists, significant obstacles now lie in its path to expansion in Libya.

The Derna Uprising

The first major challenge that the Islamic State encountered in Libya came in June 2015 in Derna, a city with a reputation for Salafist-Jihadist militancy dating to the 1980s. Ever since Libyans fighting with the Islamic State in Syria returned to Derna and formed the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC) in spring 2014, the relationship between these militants and other militias in the city, several of whom have links to al-Qaeda, has been tenuous. When the IYSC publicly pledged allegiance to Islamic State amir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2014 and redubbed itself Wilayat Barqa (Barqa refers to the eastern coastal region of Libya, or Cyrenaica), the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB)—a hardline militant group with ties to al-Qaeda that was commanded by Salim Derbi, a former member of the al-Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group—announced its disapproval, stating that it would never pledge allegiance to a group based outside of Libya. [2] In the following months, Wilayat Barqa engaged in tit-for-tat fighting with ASMB and other militias, and in December 2014, ASMB and several other militias established the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), a military coalition intended both as a counterweight to Haftar's Libyan National Army and as a bulwark against further Islamic State expansion in Derna (al-Akhbar, December 13, 2014).

While tensions between Wilayat Barqa and other militias intensified in Derna, the Islamic State's iron-fisted approach and excessive use of violence also alienated local populations in the city. In April 2015, the group launched a vicious assault on the al-Harir family, which belongs to the influential Obeidat tribe based in northeastern Libya. Members of the al-Harir family fought back and killed several militants before the family compound was overrun, the first concrete signs of local opposition against the Islamic State's local branch (Der Spiegel, September 4). According to a statement by the DMSC, Wilayat Barqa militants killed six members of the al-Harir family, including two unarmed women who were killed after the fighters originally promised that the women could go to the hospital to receive treatment. [3] Other acts of Islamic State brutality also angered Derna residents. According to one news account, the organization beheaded and then dismembered a man in April 2015, after the man's father failed to pay 300,000 Libyan dinars (over $200,000 at the current exchange rate) in protection money (al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 13). This attack, and other similar atrocities, prompted many Derna residents, including prominent tribal figures, to flee the city.

Local disillusionment with the local branch of the Islamic State extended to the group's approach to governing the city. For instance, according to a DMSC statement, Wilayat Barqa looted a bank in Derna, and also began taxing local merchants against their will. [4] Derna residents also particularly resented foreign fighters from Tunisia, Egypt and other North African countries, who had flocked to Derna to join the Islamic State there, imposing foreign customs upon the local population (Der Spiegel, September 4).

Tensions between Wilayat Barqa and other factions in Derna came to a head in June 2015, when Islamic State gunmen assassinated Nasir Atiyah al-Akar, a key leader within the DMSC. Al-Akar's death sparked clashes between the two groups, which resulted in the death of Salim Derbi, DMSC's top commander, and prompted DMSC to declare jihad against the Islamic State (Twitter, June 9). Derna residents immediately demonstrated their support for the uprising against the Islamic State, revealing the extent of local hostility toward the group. Just days after al-Akar's death, demonstrators took to the streets of Derna after Friday prayers to demand Wilayat Barqa's expulsion from the city; seven protesters were killed and approximately 30 were wounded when Islamic State fighters opened fire on the marchers (Reuters, June 12). As the uprising against the Islamic State branch gained momentum, local residents replaced Islamic State flags with the Libyan national flag and torched the building that the organization had used as its Shari'a court (Twitter, June 18).

With local backing, the DMSC drove the Islamic State out of Derna within a week, and the organization's remaining fighters withdrew to al-Fata'ih, a suburb in the hills south of Derna. In recent weeks, the Islamic State has tried to fight its way back into Derna, though it has been rebuffed and consequently remains largely confined to the city's suburbs.

The uprising against Wilayat Barqa in Derna exposed the vulnerabilities of the Islamic State's governing strategy in the city. Though the organization's religious ideology is not necessarily at odds with the sentiments of the local population—several of the militant factions that now govern Derna also adhere to a Salafist-Jihadist worldview—the Islamic State's brutality, disregard for local customs and inability to collaborate, or at the very least cohabit, with other militant groups created the conditions for a local rebellion. The local branch's failure to either dominate or co-opt entrenched militant factions in Derna, strategies that have worked well for the Islamic State organization in Syria and Iraq, left the group vulnerable to a coordinated DMSC military offensive. Meanwhile, Wilayat Barqa's alienation of the local population in Derna virtually ensured that any group that stood up to the group would receive public support.

Instability in Sirte

With Derna out of the Islamic State's hands, the militant group's center of gravity in Libya has shifted to the central city of Sirte, Mu'ammar Qaddafi's hometown. The branch in Sirte is known as Wilayat Tarablus, which refers to the historic region of Tripolitania in northwestern Libya, and this group has had success in establishing a foothold in Sirte is attributable in large part to the group's ability to exploit political conditions in the city. Since the fall of the Qaddafi regime, Sirte, like Derna, has been a stronghold of hardline Islamist groups, most notably Ansar al-Shari'a of Sirte, a Salafist-Jihadist militant group affiliated with, but organizationally distinct from, groups in Benghazi and Derna that share the Ansar al-Shari'a moniker. The Islamic State organization has ties with militant groups in Sirte dating back to June 2013, when Turki al-Binali, now one of the group's top religious scholars, delivered a series of lectures in Sirte and also recruited fighters in the city to join the Islamic State in Syria. [5] When the group began to overtly expand its presence in Libya in the fall of 2014, it was able to tap into the longstanding relationships that al-Binali and others had established. One report claims that members of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte began defecting to the local branch of the Islamic State as early as October 2014, and in January 2015, Ansar al-Shari'a in Sirte split into two factions, with the dominant group allying with the Islamic State (*New York Times*, March 10). [6] The defection of most of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte eliminated a potential source of resistance and cleared the path for the Islamic State to move into Sirte in February 2015.

Though there is no evidence indicating that Wilayat Tarablus encountered significant opposition from Sirte residents when it first moved into the city, the group's draconian governance tactics in Sirte eventually sparked blowback from local residents. As Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has noted, the Islamic State is now in a "state-building stage" in Sirte; the group has begun providing services and conducting public works projects in the city, in addition to its *dawa* (preaching) activities. [7] However, there is also a darker and more violent side to the organization's operations in Sirte; the local branch of the Islamic State has begun implementing punishments, including amputations and executions, against those who violate Shari'a law, looting the homes of local politicians and demanding that Sirte residents who previously served in the military or police seek repentance from the group. [8]

It was this latter demand that ultimately ignited tensions between the local population and Wilayat Tarablus. During Friday sermons on August 7, Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani,

a Salafist preacher from the Ferjani tribe and the imam at the Cordoba mosque in Sirte, spoke out against the Islamic State, claiming that the group did not represent Islam and that repenting before the group was forbidden (Middle East Eye, August 14). It appears that Ferjani's speech was intended to coincide with a larger uprising against the organization in the city; on August 4, a Facebook page allegedly representing Neighborhood 2 in Sirte issued a communique calling for an uprising against the Islamic State on August 7. [9] On August 11, Ferjani was assassinated by Wilayat Tarablus fighters, triggering the anticipated uprising. Members of the Ferjani tribe, Salafists and former members of the security forces in Sirte all mobilized in Neighborhood 3, one of the few remaining areas in Sirte not fully under the Islamic State's control, and began driving back the group's forces.

However, the local uprising was short-lived. Islamic State fighters in Sirte called in reinforcements from Nawfaliyah, a town approximately 150 kilometers east of Sirte that is also under Wilayat Tarablus control, and members of the resistance soon found themselves outmatched and outgunned by the heavily armed Islamic State contingent (Twitter, August 12). In short order, Islamic State fighters quelled the uprising and then retaliated massively against those suspected of participating or assisting in the rebellion. According to news reports, the organization killed dozens to hundreds of Sirte residents, including several people receiving treatment at a hospital, and publicly crucified several citizens, including two Salafist clerics, acts intended to deter Sirte residents from rebelling in the future (Twitter, August 14). In the weeks since the uprising was crushed, the Islamic State has consolidated its control over Sirte, establishing new checkpoints and imposing new restrictions on both the educational and legal systems in the city.

The Islamic State's Prospects in Libya

The uprisings in Sirte and Derna illustrate the Islamic State's greatest strengths and its greatest weaknesses in Libya. It is apparent that the local branch's heavy-handed tactics and indiscriminate use of force have alienated many Libyans and created fertile conditions for local revolts to take place. However, whereas Wilayat Barqa confronted a superior military force in the DMSC in Derna, the failure of either the Tobruk- or Tripoli-based governments to come to the aid of emboldened but poorly armed local residents in Sirte allowed Islamic State militants to quickly crush the uprising in that city.

Indeed, this incident in Sirte is a microcosm of the Islamic State's trajectory in Libya thus far. While the Tobruk and Tripoli governments have focused the vast majority of their

military resources on each other, the Islamic State has gained ground and influence, using the civil conflict as a strategic opportunity. So long as the civil conflict persists in Libya and neither Tobruk nor Tripoli focuses greater attention and resources on this jihadist threat, the Islamic State, through Wilayat Tarablus and Wilayat Barqa, will continue to wreak havoc in Sirte and other areas where it maintains influence. However, if the uprisings in Sirte and Derna are any indication, the Islamic State's ability to expand further in Libya will be constrained by the group's religious dogmatism and brutality, and by its inability to garner widespread public support from the Libyan population.

Notes

1. Charlie Winter, "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State," The Quilliam Foundation, February 2015, http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/libya-the-strategic-gateway-for-the-is.pdf.

2. Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 10, 2014, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya.

3. "The State Organization -- Why We Fought Them, and Why We Forced Them Out of the City," Derna Mujahideen Shura Council Facebook page, June 19, 2015.

4. *Ibid*.; "O Evildoer, Desist -- A Response to the State Organization's Official Spokesman," Derna Mujahideen Shura Council Facebook page, June 25, 2015.

5. For video clips of Binali's lectures in Sirte in June 2013, see https://justpaste.it/huch. See also, Kevin Casey and Stacey Pollard, "The Islamic State's Strategy in Libya," Sada, March 25, 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=59488&solr_hilite.

6. Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 6, 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-burgeoning-capital-in-sirte-libya.

7. *Ibid*.

8. *Ibid*.

9. "Uprising in Surt: Al-Nahrawan Friday, 7 August 2015, To Cleanse Our City of the Renegades and Kharijites, Enemies of God -- Surt Is One Tribe," Neighborhood 2-Surt Facebook page, August 4, 2015.