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IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS 1

THE SAHEL'S MILITANT 'MELTING POT': HAMADOU KOUFFA'S MACINA LIBERATION FRONT (FLM)
By Jacob Zenn 3

THE HOUTHIS' COUNTER-OFFENSIVE IN YEMEN: STRATEGY, AIMS AND OUTCOMES
By Michael Horton 6

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED, TRY DECEPTION: THE ISLAMIC STATE'S EXPANSION EFFORTS IN ALGERIA
By Nathaniel Barr 8



Houthi forces allegedly attacking Saudi Arabian troops near al-Rabu'ah, Saudi Arabia.

JORDAN 'GREEN ON BLUE' ATTACK LIKELY SHOWS ISLAMIC STATE REACH

James Brandon

A Jordanian police officer, Captain Anwar Abu Zaid, shot dead two U.S. nationals, two Jordanians and one South African in an apparent “green-on-blue” attack at a police training facility to the east of the capital Amman on November 9. Several others were also injured before the shooter could be shot and killed. A relative was reported as saying that Abu Zaid, a 28-year-old from a village in the northern governorate of Jerash, was “religious but moderate” (*Jordan Times*, November 10). Although no group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack, it was likely to have been either carried on the instructions of the Islamic State group or to have been inspired by the group’s ideology.

Significantly, the attack took place on the tenth anniversary of al-Qaeda in Iraq’s coordinated bomb attacks on three hotels in Amman on November 9, 2005 (*Jordan Times*, November 9). Those attacks killed 60 people, most of them when suicide bombers attacked a wedding, and were a seismic event in Jordan’s modern political history, provoking a wave of revulsion in that country against al-Qaeda and against the use of suicide bombing tactics in general (BBC, November 10, 2005). That the latest attack fell on the anniversary of these bombings seems likely to have been intended to send a message to the Jordanian government and people. In particular, the 2005 attack was carried out by al-Qaeda in Iraq, which is effectively the predecessor of the current Islamic State group, which likely conducted the latest attack. Significantly too, one of the 2005 attackers, an Iraqi woman called Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi, was captured when her suicide bomb belt failed to detonate. She was executed following the Islamic State’s killing of captured Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh in January 2015, after that latter was shot down while conducting military operations against the group in Syria (al-

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Monitor, January 7). This latest attack can therefore likely be seen both as a reminder by the Islamic State of the continuing reach of the group into Jordan and as a belated response to Jordan's execution of al-Rishawi. At the same time, however, the shooters' decision to primarily attack a military target associated with the United States, is also telling and suggests that the Islamic State, if indeed they directed the attack, may not be willing to risk provoking a backlash among Jordanian society as was caused by the 2005 attacks on hotels.

The recent attack is also a reminder that Jordan has been relatively quiet in recent years, despite its proximity to ongoing highly-active conflicts in neighboring Syria and Iraq and in nearby northern Sinai in Egypt. There are, however, a number of factors that could lead to further attacks, in both the short and longer term. For instance, despite growing at three percent this year, the Jordanian economy remains under enormous pressure due to the country's lack of natural resources and high levels of population growth; the unemployment rate reached an estimated ten percent and was over 20 percent in areas with high levels of refugees (al-Arabiya, May 17). Jordan's refugee population is estimated to include at least 600,000 Syrians as well as a large number of Iraqis, putting substantial strain on Jordan's infrastructure (UNHCR, 2015). Meanwhile, the country's political opposition is weak, and legal outlets for venting frustrations at economic problems remain sparse. The country also has a highly active Salafist movement, including prominent hardliners such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who have previously expressed support for a range of jihadist groups (including al-Qaeda), and there is the clear potential for such anti-Western preachers to either—deliberately or inadvertently—inspire disenfranchised individuals to conduct attacks within Jordan. In addition, Jordan has seen apparent attempts by Syrian-based militants to cross its borders, although most seem to have been prevented by the country's strict border controls, backed by the army's "shoot to kill" policy towards suspected infiltrators (*Daily Star* [Beirut], August 17). In this context, despite the Jordanian security forces' undoubted counter-terrorism competence, further attacks appear likely.

EVIDENCE MOUNTS OF ISLAMIC STATE INFLUENCE IN INDONESIA

James Brandon

A series of incidents and official statements in recent weeks underline the growing allure of the Islamic State group in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. In late October, for instance, the country's National Counter-terrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme—BNPT) said that over 500 Indonesians were believed to have joined the group, although the police had only identified 200 of them (Channel News Asia, October 27). A BNPT spokesman said that a significant problem facing the police is that Indonesians often travel to Syria via complex routes, often under the pretext of undertaking pilgrimage in the wider Middle East, and that the authorities often only discover that a person had joined the Islamic State when the group announces their death.

In addition, the country's foreign ministry said this month that 119 Indonesians had been deported from Turkey on suspicion of seeking to cross into Syria (ABC [Sydney], November 10). Other countries have also intercepted would-be jihadists, with Singapore deporting two Indonesian individuals suspected of intending to travel to Syria back to Indonesia in November (*Straits Times* [Singapore], November 11). In addition, the deaths of Indonesian Islamic State volunteers continue to be reported from Syria. One of the most prominent recent fatalities was Umar Jundul Haq (nicknamed "Uncu"), who was the son of Imam Samudra, who carried out the 2002 Bali bombings (*The Australian*, October 19).

Evidence suggests that the profile of Indonesian recruits remain diverse, as do their motives. For instance, Ahmad Junaedi, a meatball seller from Java who was arrested after his return from the Islamic State's territories in Syria, recently told a court in October that he had been partly motivated by promises of a high salary for joining the group (Channel News Asia, October 23). He said he left the group in part because he had been given menial tasks, such as making kebabs for Arab fighters, and was paid only \$50 a month. His account is in keeping with other Southeast Asian volunteers' accounts of the Arab-dominated group's dismissive attitude towards them. On the other hand, another recent recruit is believed to be senior civil servant Dwi Djoko Wiwoho, the director of the Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board's licensing office in the Riau Islands, who is believed to have travelled to Syria via Turkey while on holiday from work in August (*Straits Times* [Singapore], November 11). His current whereabouts are not known. Other recent studies,

for instance by the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), have drawn attention to the migration of whole families to Islamic State-controlled parts of Syria, with such moves sometimes driven not by husbands, but by female family members and teenage children (*Jakarta Post*, November 9).

So far, there have been no attacks in Indonesia directly linked to the Islamic State, illustrating that the group's Malay-language propaganda has so far focused primarily on encouraging radicals to come to their "caliphate," rather than conducting attacks in their home countries. Indonesia is, however, well aware of the potential threat and has recently announced plans to work to jointly with Australia to rehabilitate returning Islamic State fighters (*Sydney Morning Herald*, September 28).

The Sahel's Militant 'Melting Pot': Hamadou Kouffa's Macina Liberation Front (FLM)

Jacob Zenn

After the French-led military intervention in northern Mali in 2013, the leading jihadist groups there, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), its affiliate Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and its local "front group" Ansar Dine, dispersed from the towns they held. One of the militant groups to emerge from the aftermath of this upheaval in Mali was the Macina Liberation Front (Front de Libération du Macina—FLM), which first became known in January 2015. The FLM, with estimates of the number of affiliated militants ranging from the low hundreds to as many as 4,000, represents a new militant trend in southern Mali and neighboring countries. This is because the FLM seems to be an updated version of its "parent" groups by incorporating:

- AQIM's strategy for Mali—and sub-Saharan Africa more generally—and acting as a "front group" of Ansar Dine (which itself is a "front group" of AQIM) and disguising its connections to al-Qaeda;
- Ex-MUJWA militants who after the French-led military intervention in northern Mali neither fled to Libya with late AQIM southern commander Abu Zeid's Tareq bin Zayed Brigade nor followed MUJWA leaders Hamadou Kheiry and Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in pledging loyalty to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; and
- Ansaru-like historical narratives combined with the *takfiri* ideology of Boko Haram (now the Islamic State's West Africa Province, or ISWA).

Moreover, in terms of its objectives, the FLM represents what Sahelian al-Qaeda mastermind, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and his relative and former MUJWA leader, Oumar Ould Hamaha, always wanted: a front throughout the southern Sahara (AP, December 3, 2012). In fact, Belmokhtar reportedly "outsourced" operations in southern Mali through Ansar Dine to the FLM (Liberte Online [Algiers], August 16).

This article provides a background on the leadership, ideology, strategy and attacks of the FLM, and places these attributes within the context of regional trends in the Sahel. Understanding the FLM may, in turn, assist intelligence and counter-insurgency professionals anticipate the "next war"

in the Sahel.

Leadership

The leader of the FLM is Hamadou Kouffa, a *marabout* (religious teacher) over 50 years old who grew up in the small town of Niafunke in central Mali (Malijet, January 23). Kouffa rose to prominence on January 10, 2013, when he led an offensive by AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJWA into the town of Konna in central Mali, and declared himself the “Sultan of Konna” (Mali Actu, July 16). This was the militants’ deepest push toward Mali’s capital of Bamako during the entire “jihadist occupation” of northern Mali. However, the over-ambitious offensive backfired when it compelled the French to begin their military intervention in that region, which subsequently ousted the militants there.

Kouffa’s popularity came in part from his mastery of radio as a tool for communication in his native Fulani language (*Telegraph* [London], September 23). Because of this, many of Kouffa’s recruits are Fulanis, and the FLM is often considered in Malian media to be a “Fulani movement.” Nonetheless, there is little evidence to suggest that the FLM incorporates Fulanis in West Africa beyond Mali and its borderlands.

In terms of religious affiliation, Kouffa—like his mentor, Ansar Dine leader Ag Ghaly—joined the Dawa movement (often also known as Tablighi Jamaat), when Gulf-funded “humanitarian organizations” arrived in Mali to preach their conservative brand of Islam in the 1990s (Mali Actu, August 21). Kouffa implemented this ostensibly non-violent conservative ideology until the period from 2001 to 2008, when he visited Afghanistan, India and Qatar, before coming back to Mali with more extreme views. In the context of the war in Mali in 2012, he also condemned senior religious leaders and judges for corruption and not implementing Shari’a. When Kouffa ousted control of the central Malian town of Konna from these rivals, he announced that:

There are no more prefects, sub-prefects, mayors, taxes and duties, and no more national identity cards... Women will stay at home, only come out when veiled, and there are no more laws other than the Shari’a, and it is the imam of Konna who will be responsible for its implementation (Mali Actu, August 21).

While his relations with AQIM, MUJWA and Ansar Dine developed when he was fighting with those groups in central Mali in 2013, Kouffa is only rumored to have “nursed” the idea of joining with Nigeria-based militants in Boko Haram or Ansaru, which may have taken part in the Kouffa-led offensive in Konna in January 2013 (Mali Actu, September 21;

African Arguments, January 20, 2014). Nonetheless, Kouffa’s *takfiri* ideology and temperament has led a Malian defense official to label him as a new “Abubakr Shekau,” referring to the Boko Haram and now ISWA leader, and to accordingly label the FLM as Mali’s new “Boko Haram” (Jeune Afrique [Paris], August 23),

Ideology and Strategy

The FLM’s ideology draws on narratives of reviving the 19th century Fulani-led Macina Empire, which existed in present-day Mali, to support its legitimacy. Similarly, AQIM presents narratives showing that it seeks to restore the Andalusian empire in southern Spain, MUJWA seeks to revive the “jihad” of Alhaji Umar Tell and Ansaru seeks to revive the “jihad” of Usman Dan Fodio. Though Kouffa’s Salafist-inspired version of Islam is of a different variety than that of the historical jihadist forefathers of West Africa, his expropriation of historical narratives of the region adds a layer of sophistication—and, potentially, attraction—to the FLM’s recruitment efforts.

In this respect, the FLM seems to reflect an outcome of AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel’s strategy to plant the “seeds” for the implementation of Shari’a in Mali dating back to 2012 or earlier. In documents that reporters found in Mali after the French-led intervention in 2013, Droukdel advised AQIM and partner militant groups to “pretend to be a ‘domestic’ movement that has its own causes and concerns,” and to avoid “showing that we have an expansionary, jihadist, al-Qaeda or any other sort of project” (AP, February 15, 2013). Thus, the FLM is portraying itself as a “liberation” movement and—at least publicly—hiding its ties to Ansar Dine, or AQIM or any other al-Qaeda group has allowed FLM to remain under the radar of international counter-insurgency efforts, which was exactly Droukdel’s (and Osama bin Laden’s) justification for this type of strategy.

Attacks

Despite the FLM’s low visibility, the group’s record of attacks shows that they have been able to extend AQIM’s reach into central and southern Mali. FLM attacks in Mali in 2015 include the following:

- On April 22, two FLM militants raided the village of Dogo, and killed Issa Dicko, the head of the village, after accusing him of being paid by the Malian government, the UN and French Armed Forces (Radio Nata [Gao], April 14).

- On May 4, the FLM destroyed the mausoleum in Hamdallaye, Mali, of Shaykh Sekou Amadou, who founded the Macina Empire in 1818, but whose mausoleum the FLM considers to be an idolatrous shrine (AP, May 4)
 - On June 27, Ansar Dine claimed its Khalid Ibn al-Walid Brigade, coming from the Mauritanian border, had joined with the “Macina Brigade” to attack Malian soldiers in the town of Nara (Reuters, July 6).
 - On August 10, FLM militants looted several shops in Tenenkou in Mopti, in central Mali, and blew up a vehicle in a reconnaissance convoy of the Malian Armed Forces in the town of Dia, killing three Malian soldiers (Mali Actu, August 11).
 - On August 12, three “supporters of Kouffa” were arrested by Malian security forces after they took part in an attack on the Byblos hotel in the town of Sevare, Mali, with Belmokhtar- and MUJWA-founded al-Murabitun. The attack led to the deaths of 10 civilians and three Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (MINUSMA) employees. It was claimed by one of Kouffa’s deputies, Souleyman Mohamed Kennen, in a brief phone conversation with AFP, where he said that “the hand of Allah has guided the mujahideen of Sevare against the enemies of Islam,” that Kouffa gave his “blessing” for the attack to be carried out and that the “mujahideen” were also behind the killing of three Malian soldiers in Mopti several days earlier (Mali Actu, August 12).
 - On August 15, two FLM militants killed Aladji Sekou, a 63-year-old imam and local MP from Barkerou, Mali, because, according to Sekou’s nephew, Sekou was their religious “opponent” (*Le Figaro* [Paris], August 15).
 - On September 9, Kouffa reportedly held a meeting in Dogofri in Segou, where he told his supporters to “strive harder to disseminate and implement Shari’a,” and planned attacks for the eve of the celebration of Eid al-Kabir (Mali Actu, September 11).
 - On September 12, FLM militants on motorcycles killed two police officers and two civilians in an attack on a security post in the village of Ouenkoro in Bankass, Mopti, which is near the border with Burkina Faso (Malijet, September 17).
 - On September 19, FLM militants on motorcycles attacked a security post at Bih in Mopti, killing two policemen and two civilians (*Le Monde*, September 23).
 - On October 9, 50 FLM militants were suspected of an attack where militants on motorcycles waving black flags killed three civilians in Dounapen in Mopti, near the Burkina Faso border, after they carried out an attack several hours earlier on the gendarmerie post at Samorogouan in Burkina Faso (Net Afrique, October 9).
- At the same time, however, there have been counter-terrorism successes against the FLM. For example:
- On September 7, Kouffa’s Burkinabe “senior assistant” and former member of the Islamic Police in AQIM- and Ansar Dine-controlled Timbuktu, Hassan Dicko (a.k.a. Abu Leila), was one of three militants arrested in Bamako. After his arrest, the security forces learned he was liaising between the FLM and Ansar Dine, and that FLM intended to be the “Ansar Dine of the south [of Mali].” The two other militants who were arrested with Dicko were the Ivorian Ayouba Sangare, one of Ag Ghaly’s assistants and a weapons provider to the FLM, and the Malian Ali Sangare, a transporter of weapons who played a key role in the attack on the residence of the Burkina Faso contingent of MINUSMA in Bamako (*Le Figaro* [Paris], September 7).
 - On September 14, Algerian security forces intercepted a shipment of arms in Borj Badji Mokhtar in southwestern Algeria near the Malian border, which were suspected of being part of a delivery to the FLM (Ennahar Online, September 15).
 - On September 17, Malian security forces arrested three FLM militants, who were operating near the border with Côte d’Ivoire (Mali Web, September 17).
- FLM attacks and arrests show that the FLM is closely connected to militancy in Mali, but also to Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Mauritania and Algeria.

Conclusion

Kouffa’s apparent ability to draw on AQIM’s strategic guidance and historical narratives to justify FLM’s jihad in post-civil war Mali contributes to the FLM’s effectiveness in recruitment and carrying out attacks. At a time when AQIM and Ansar Dine are operating in northern Mali and ISWA is pre-occupying militaries further south toward Nigeria, the FLM is becoming yet another destabilizing militant force in the region. If the FLM continues to escalate attacks and spread further into countries like Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire, international and national counter-insurgency forces in the region will continue to see their resources strained and their

collective will tested.

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The Houthis' Counter-Offensive in Yemen: Strategy, Aims and Outcomes

Michael Horton

After seven months of military operations in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners are facing a counter-offensive by Yemen's Houthi rebels. The Houthis—who refer to themselves as Ansar Allah—and allied units of the Yemeni Army launched a three-pronged offensive designed to broadly encircle Yemen's port city of Aden, and further isolate the fiercely contested city of Taiz.

It is unlikely that the Houthis and allied forces want to retake Aden, or secure and hold those territories that were part of what was an independent South Yemen (the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen). One reason is that the Houthis and their allies, who are mostly drawn from Yemen's northern elite, will find it increasingly difficult to operate outside of their traditional powerbases in northwest Yemen, particularly as seven months of civil war have further solidified the divide between north and south. Additionally, those forces based in south Yemen that oppose the Houthis are better armed and marginally better trained than they were seven months ago, when the Houthis and allied forces took over Aden before being pushed out by a Saudi-backed offensive.

The Houthis' renewed push south is both an effort to secure the borders of what was formerly North Yemen (the former Yemen Arab Republic) and an effort to strengthen their position ahead of expected UN-led peace talks in Geneva. The counter-offensive also coincides with what may be a shift in the willingness of Saudi Arabia and its partners to continue fighting in Yemen.

Renewed Push South

Houthi fighters and allied Yemeni Army units began a well-coordinated counter-offensive in late October, when small, mobile bands of fighters moved toward the towns of Dhubab (located on the Red Sea coast), Damt (centrally located on the main road from Sana'a to Aden) and al-Bayda (a town located along another important north-south corridor). The towns were all occupied by members of the Popular Resistance, a loose alliance of southern separatists, tribal militias, militant Salafists and backers of Yemen's exiled, Saudi-backed government.

By November 8, the Houthis and allied forces had seized control of Dhubab and Damt (Middle East Online, November 8; al-Masdar, November 8). They, however, failed to retake al-Bayda, where fighting continues. Further south, in what appears to be a separate but linked operation, Houthi fighters have taken up positions on the hills north of al-Anad airbase, in the governorate of Lahij. Sudanese soldiers fighting on behalf of the Saudi-led coalition are housed on the base (*Jordan Times*, November 8). Al-Anad, along with Aden's international airport, is also used by the coalition as a base for its Apache attack helicopters.

The Houthi leadership has promised to “liberate” the airbase, but the forces have not attacked al-Anad despite holding the high ground. The deployment of 400 additional Sudanese troops to Aden on November 9, may be a response to this Houthi led counter-offensive (Middle East Eye, November 9). However, the troops, who arrived in Aden with lightly armored APCs and Toyota trucks, will find it difficult to resupply and defend the airbase, which is reliant on a single road that links Aden with Sana'a. The road and vehicles traveling on it are highly vulnerable to ambush attacks, which the Houthis excel at.

The fact that the Houthis and their allies were able to push as far south as al-Anad—located just 40 miles north of Aden—demonstrates that the Popular Resistance and Saudi-led coalition forces exercise little control over areas outside of the coalition's headquarters and the temporary capital of Aden.

Objectives

As outlined above, the objectives of the current Houthi offensive are most probably threefold: secure the borders of what was North Yemen ahead of negotiations, further isolate the besieged city of Taiz and increase the pressure on Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners.

The first of these aims underlines that the restoration of a unified Yemen looks increasingly unlikely. The divisions between north and south Yemen were significant before the outbreak of civil war. After the Houthi's brutal occupation of Aden and the Popular Resistance fighters' alliance with Saudi Arabia, whose air campaign and naval blockade have devastated Yemen, these divisions are now chasms. Symbolic of this is that the flag of the unified Republic of Yemen is no longer flown in southern Yemen, and the flag of the formerly independent South Yemen now flies outside of the exiled Yemeni government's offices in Aden.

Despite the Houthis' and their allies' rhetoric about reunifying the country, the leadership in Sana'a likely realizes that this is impossible to achieve through military means and also unlikely via political means. However, the northern-based leadership also knows that North Yemen is not viable without southern Yemen's resources. Most of Yemen's remaining oil and gas reserves are located in South Yemen. Thus, the Houthis and the northern elites allied with them will continue to put pressure on the south militarily.

The second critical objective of the current offensive is to further isolate the city of Taiz, where the Houthis have enforced a blockade for months. Taiz, which is located within the densely populated and well-watered central highlands, has long been on the cultural and physical border between North and South Yemen. As such, while it was part of North Yemen, it has always been contested during times of civil strife. The Houthis and, more broadly, the northern elites know that they must control Taiz and its economic resources if they want to maintain their position as leading power brokers in Yemen. If the current counter-offensive is successful, it will mean that Taiz is surrounded by territory that is controlled by the Houthis and their allies.

The third objective is to increase pressure on Saudi Arabia and its partners. The Houthis' current offensive is occurring at the same time as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are reconsidering the efficacy of their direct involvement in the war. In early November, the UAE began moving significant numbers of its troops out of Yemen. While the UAE states that this is simply a troop rotation, it is worth noting that along with the troops, the UAE is also moving out much of its hardware, which is unusual if this is indeed a troop rotation (*Khaleej Times*, November 3).

Additional Pressure Points

As part of their strategy to exert pressure on the coalition—in particular on Saudi Arabia—the Houthis and allied units of the Yemeni Army continue to launch hit and run operations along Saudi Arabia's southern border. In what appears to be an escalation of the cross border attacks, on November 5, Houthi forces seized—and briefly held—the Saudi border town of al-Rabu'ah. [1] While the attacks have not been covered or documented by Western or Gulf-based media outlets, the Houthis have posted hours of video on YouTube that purports to show their forces attacking what appear to be elements of the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF), Saudi towns and numerous border posts.

In addition to maintaining, if not intensifying, their cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia, Houthi media outlets claim

that the Houthis and elements of the Yemeni Armed Forces have successfully targeted Saudi and Emirati naval ships off Yemen's Red Sea coast. These attacks have not been confirmed by Saudi Arabia or the UAE. However, the Yemeni Navy does have Chinese C-802 anti-ship missiles in its inventory so such attacks are possible.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that the current counter-offensive will result in the Houthis and their allies regaining control of Aden and the parts of southwest Yemen that they briefly controlled in mid-2015. The Houthi leadership and the northern elites allied with them know that they cannot retake, much less secure, all of southwest Yemen, even if Saudi Arabia and its partners cease military operations in the country.

However, the counter-offensive shows Saudi Arabia and its partners that seven months' of intense aerial bombardment has done little to impede the Houthis' and their allies' ability to plan and execute complex offensives. While the counter-offensive does have important strategic aims, its primary purpose is to strengthen the Houthis' and their allies' bargaining position in Geneva, if—and when—talks begin.

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Notes

1. The video purports to show Houthi and allied Yemeni Army units in action against the RSLF in al-Rabu'ah, a town located in Saudi Arabia's Asir region that is home to ethnic Yemenis, some of whom are Zaidi Shi'a. The video can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AJy05cNJ-c>.
2. See: <http://www.janes.com/article/55592/yemeni-rebels-claim-third-anti-ship-missile-attack>.

If at First You Don't Succeed, Try Deception: The Islamic State's Expansion Efforts in Algeria

Nathaniel Barr

Since announcing the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014, the Islamic State has broadcast its successes in expanding into new territories outside of Syria and Iraq, aiming to create the perception that it is growing rapidly throughout the Muslim world, and steadily chipping away at al-Qaeda's position as the preeminent global jihadist organization. But contrary to the former's claims, the group's expansion efforts have often been fraught with setbacks. In some theaters, the Islamic State has confronted more powerful jihadist organizations, many of them al-Qaeda affiliates, who have resisted efforts to sow internal discord and inspire defections. The Islamic State has also run up against state security forces who have sought to eliminate affiliated groups before they can gain a foothold. To date, however, the Islamic State's expansion struggles have often gone relatively unnoticed, as the group has effectively masked its weaknesses and projected an image of strength through its propaganda.

Nowhere have the organization's struggles been more pronounced than in Algeria. While Algeria was one of the first countries outside of Syria and Iraq where the Islamic State established a physical presence, two factors have prevented the group from solidifying its gains and making further inroads. First, a superior jihadist organization in al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has pushed back against the Islamic State's encroachment in Algeria. AQIM has waged a propaganda battle against its jihadist rival, and has mounted a military campaign aimed at demonstrating to rank-and-file militants in Algeria that it is more powerful than the Islamic State. Second, Islamic State factions in Algeria have been unable to evade Algeria's security forces, who have aggressively and proactively cracked down on them. With both AQIM and Algerian security forces pressuring the Islamic State, the group has resorted to a familiar propaganda strategy of deception and exaggeration to preserve its influence in Algeria. The article will examine the Islamic State's struggles in Algeria in the context of the group's broader international expansion efforts.

Islamic State's Initial Advance into Algeria

The Islamic State's expansion into Algeria came without warning, when members of AQIM's "center zone," led by Abdelmalek Gouri, announced in September 2014 that they

were joining the rival jihadist group. In his statement, Gouri said that AQIM had “deviat[ed] from the true path,” and he proclaimed that his group would henceforth be known as Jund al-Khilafah, or Soldiers of the Caliphate (al-Jazeera, September 14, 2014). Less than two weeks after Gouri’s pledge of allegiance, Jund al-Khilafah announced its arrival on the world stage by kidnapping and beheading Herve Gourdel, a French citizen who had been hiking in the mountains of the Kabylie region, a longtime hotbed of jihadist activity (al-Jazeera, September 25, 2014). Jund al-Khilafah filmed Gourdel’s beheading and presented the execution as an act of retaliation against France for its involvement in the anti-Islamic State military campaign in Iraq. The group’s decision to carry out a high-profile beheading as its first act of violence was emblematic of the Islamic State’s global messaging strategy; in theaters outside of Iraq and Syria, the organization has repeatedly conducted spectacular attacks as a means of drawing attention to new Islamic State affiliates.

However, although the Islamic State had announced its presence in Algeria with a bang, Jund al-Khilafah’s prospects thereafter declined rapidly. In December 2014—a month after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Islamic State’s amir, accepted Jund al-Khilafah’s pledge of allegiance and announced the creation of Wilayat al-Jazair (Algeria province)—the Algerian Army killed Gouri, who was Jund al-Khilafah’s top commander, and two other militants in a raid in northern Algeria (al-Arabiya, December 23, 2014). A crippling blow was delivered to Jund al-Khilafah in May 2015, when Algerian security forces killed approximately 25 Islamic State militants in two days of military operations in the mountains of Bouira Province (Reuters, May 20). At the time of the first raid, which resulted in the death of 22 fighters, Jund al-Khilafah’s top commanders had reportedly been meeting to plan major attacks, possibly in Algiers or against Algerian military facilities, and Algerian troops recovered a sizable weapons arsenal during the operation (*El Watan* [Algiers], May 22).

The May raid devastated Jund al-Khilafah. International media reports placed the size of the group at only 30 fighters, meaning that the raid in May had wiped out almost all of the group’s manpower (*New York Times*, December 23, 2014). The raid also decimated Jund al-Khilafah’s leadership ranks: five of the group’s six commanders were killed in the operation, including Abdullah Othman al-Asimi (a.k.a. Bachir Kherza), who had been appointed to lead Jund al-Khilafah after Gouri’s death (*El Watan* [Algiers], May 24).

Jund al-Khilafah’s precipitous collapse revealed the fragility of the Islamic State’s foothold in Algeria. Its rapid and highly public rise to prominence may have been to its detriment,

as the group was not strong enough in its nascent stages to withstand the crackdown that inevitably followed the release of the beheading video. Indeed, though Jund al-Khilafah claimed responsibility for three minor attacks against security forces in February and March of 2015, the group has not mustered enough force to carry out another high-profile attack since the kidnapping and beheading of Gourdel (Jihadology, March 19). And while Jund al-Khilafah had reportedly been in the process of wooing AQIM fighters based in southern Algeria and northern Mali, the near obliteration of the group in May likely curtailed these recruitment operations and reduced the Islamic State’s influence in the region (*El Khabar* [Algiers], July 21).

Jund al-Khilafah, or what remains of the group, is now a strategically irrelevant player in Algeria. Though remnants of the group may continue to operate in the Kabylie region, the group does not presently possess the manpower or resources to significantly threaten Algeria’s security or AQIM’s Algerian network.

Smoke and Mirrors: Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy in Algeria

With its physical network in Algeria decimated, the Islamic State has turned to its propaganda machine to help reestablish itself in the country. In particular, the group has exploited social media and other platforms to create the illusion that militants in Algeria are defecting from AQIM and flocking to the Islamic State in droves. According to their logic, if the Islamic State can foster the perception that it is ascendant and AQIM is internally factious, it can persuade Algerian jihadists to defect from AQIM. Thus, the Islamic State’s strategy is designed to turn the myth of momentum into a reality. This is an approach that the organization has also implemented in other areas where it is seeking to expand, including Afghanistan and Somalia.

The primary means by which the Islamic State has sought to cultivate momentum in Algeria is by publicizing pledges of allegiance that Algerian jihadists have made. Four jihadist groups have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State since Jund al-Khilafah did so, with some of the pledges timed to maximize the attention they receive. The first pledge of allegiance that the Islamic State received in 2015 came in May from a group of fighters in Skikda Province, in eastern Algeria. [1] The pledge, which was issued via audio statement, provided little information on the members of the Skikda faction, aside from the fact that they had previously been aligned with AQIM. The next pledge of allegiance came in late July, when militants claiming to be part of AQIM’s al-Ghuraba Brigade, which operates in the vicinity of the eastern

Algerian city of Constantine, announced their defection to the Islamic State in an audio statement and called upon other AQIM members to join the other group as well. [2] In early August, Islamic State militants from Iraq's Saladin Province released a video praising the al-Ghuraba militants, thereby drawing further attention to the defection. [3]

The Islamic State's next moves in Algeria further showed how the group manipulates social media to inflate its presence and create the perception of discord within rival jihadist organizations. On September 3, Islamic State Twitter supporters released a video of the al-Ghuraba cell's pledge of allegiance (only an audio statement had been released when the group initially pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in July). The next day, militants claiming to be from AQIM's al-Ansar Brigade, which operates in central Algeria, released an audio statement announcing their defection. [4] The re-release of the al-Ghuraba militants' pledge of allegiance appears to have been strategically timed to coincide with the pledge from the al-Ansar Brigade, creating the illusion that AQIM militants were defecting to the Islamic State en masse. Approximately two weeks after the pledge of allegiance from the al-Ansar militants, Humat al-Da'wah al-Salafiyah, a low profile Algerian jihadist group that had joined AQIM in 2013, announced that it too was pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (SITE, September 22). The organization's social media operatives immediately sought to publicize the defections; one prolific pro-Islamic State Twitter account remarked that a new group was defecting from AQIM to the Islamic State every day, while another Twitter supporter claimed that AQIM was fracturing as a result of Islamic State pressure. [5] [6]

Despite the Islamic State's efforts to foment unrest within AQIM, the group has been unsuccessful in turning the impression of strength into a reality. None of the four groups that have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Algeria in 2015 have carried out an attack since joining. Indeed, there is reason to believe that some of these groups comprise fewer than a dozen militants; one news report claimed that the al-Ghuraba and Skikda cells had been inactive for several years, and also noted that the al-Ghuraba cell consisted of no more than ten fighters (al-Arabi al-Jadeed [London], July 27). The situation has become so grim for the Islamic State in Algeria that the group itself has acknowledged its struggles. On October 21, the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Jazair released an audio statement in which a militant reassured jihadists that the group's presence in Algeria was sustainable, and urged Islamic State fighters in Algeria not to risk their lives unnecessarily, fearing a repeat of Jund al-Khilafah's collapse. [7] That the Islamic State, a group that endlessly parades its victories and conceals its defeats, felt the need to reassure

its supporters in Algeria that it was still relevant reveals the organization's bleak prospects in the country.

AQIM's Response to the Islamic State Threat

One explanation for Islamic State's struggles in Algeria is the strong front that AQIM has presented against encroachment. AQIM has implemented a two-pronged strategy to counter the Islamic State's influence in Algeria. On the propaganda front, AQIM has sought to discredit the other group. For instance, in July 2015, AQIM released a statement via Twitter accusing the Islamic State of sowing discord within the jihadist community and blaming the group for inciting a jihadist civil war in the Libyan city of Derna. [8] AQIM has also directly undercut the Islamic State's propaganda operations in Algeria; following the al-Ansar Brigade's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, AQIM released a statement claiming that the al-Ansar Brigade remained loyal to al-Qaeda, and said that no more than ten men from the brigade had defected. [9]

In addition, AQIM has intensified its military operations in Algeria to demonstrate to militants that it remains the most potent jihadist force in the country and that defections from AQIM to the Islamic State have not diminished AQIM's military capabilities. In July 2015, AQIM carried out an attack that amounted to a show of force, killing at least nine Algerian soldiers in the Ain Defla region southwest of Algiers (Reuters, July 19). In a statement, AQIM noted that it had carried out the attack, the bloodiest jihadist operation in Algeria in over a year, in response to Algerian military claims that the militant group had been "eradicated and destroyed." [10] However, the attack also sent a clear message to the Islamic State, and to AQIM's own fighters, that AQIM was still a force to be reckoned with in Algeria. Since the Ain Defla incident, AQIM, which had been largely inactive militarily in 2014, has carried out several more attacks inside Algeria, suggesting that AQIM has made a strategic decision to ramp up its operational tempo in Algeria to ward off a challenge from the Islamic State.

Implications for Algeria

AQIM's escalation in response to the challenge from the Islamic State comes at a fraught time for Algeria, whose policymakers and security officials are preoccupied with resolving the conflicts in Libya and Mali and preventing spillover into the country. These security challenges also come as tensions between Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the DRS, Algeria's powerful intelligence service, are mounting. In addition, in the background is the potential succession crisis when Bouteflika, whose health has

deteriorated following a stroke in 2013, eventually passes away. These concerns are compounded by persistent economic and social discontent among the Algerian population; in early 2015, thousands of Algerians took to the streets of Algiers and other cities to protest against corruption, political and economic stagnation and the government's decision to begin fracking for shale gas in southern Algeria.

AQIM's resurgence and the lingering threat of Islamic State expansion therefore poses yet another challenge for Algerian policymakers. Even though the Islamic State has proven incapable of gaining a foothold in Algeria thus far, the group's expansion efforts have still had a negative impact on Algeria's security, as AQIM increases its operations against Algerian security forces in response to the Islamic State challenge. In addition, AQIM's attempts to out-compete the Islamic State through conducting attacks will almost certainly intensify if the latter manages to solidify its presence in Algeria. As such, the competition between the Islamic State and AQIM can be expected to have an outsize impact on Algeria's security and stability in the coming months.

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Notes

1. For the audio clip of "Statement from the Mujahidin: Bay'ah To the Caliph of the Muslims Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," see <http://jihadology.net/category/countries/algeria/page/2/>.
2. For the audio clip of "Bay'ah of the Mujahidin in the City of Qusantinah (Constantine) To the Caliph of the Muslims Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Joining The Islamic State's Wilayah al-Jaza'ir," see <http://jihadology.net/2015/07/25/new-audio-message-from-sarayyah-al-ghuraba-bayah-of-the-mujahidin-in-the-city-of-qusan%E1%B9%ADinah-constantine-to-the-caliph-of-the-muslims-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-and-joining-the-islamic-state/>.
3. For the video clip of "One Body #2: Congratulations To Our Brothers In Algeria – Wilayah Salah al-Din," see <http://jihadology.net/2015/08/10/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-one-body-2-congratulations-to-our-brothers-in-algeria-wilayat-%E1%B9%A3ala%E1%B8%A5-al-din/>.
4. For the audio clip of "Statement from the Mujahidin: Bay'ah To the Caliph of the Muslims Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Joining The Islamic State's Wilayah al-Jaza'ir," see <http://jihadology.net/2015/09/04/new-audio-message-from-katibat-al-an%E1%B9%A3ar-statement-from-the-mujahidin-bayah-to-the-caliph-of-the-muslims-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-and-joining-the-islamic-states-wilayat-al-jaz/>.

5. Tweets from Twitter account of M. Gharib al-Ikhwan (@bhbhbhbh131), September 21, 2015.

6. Tweets from Twitter account of Uyun al-Ummah (@Oyoon_is), September 21, 2015.

7. For the audio clip of "One Body – Wilayah al-Jaza'ir," see <https://archive.org/details/algasd>.

8. Tweets from Twitter account of @AI_Andalus, July 7, 2015.

9. For the statement from AQIM, titled "About the Rumor of the Allegiance of Katibat al-Ansar to the 'State Organization,'" see https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-22about-the-rumor-of-the-allegiance-of-katc4abbat-al-ane1b9a3c481r-to-the-state-organization22.pdf.

10. For the statement from AQIM, titled "The Raid of Jebel al-Luh: The Destruction of 14 Soldiers and Spoils of Their Weapons," see https://justpaste.it/Jbl_Allouh.