

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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IRAQ: ISLAMIC STATE TARGETS KRG-ADMINISTERED OILFIELD

Alexander Sehmer

Islamic State (IS) fighters attacked the Bai Hasan oil field in Kirkuk, northern Iraq on July 31, killing at least four people, including oil workers and security guards. Two coordinated attacks saw suicide bombers hit the oilfield and a nearby gas compressor station, causing a fire to break out ([Iraq Oil Report](#), July 31).

The attack temporarily closed the oil field, but the facility – despite the fire, which at that point was not yet fully extinguished – was reportedly back in operation less than 24 hours later ([Rudaw](#), August, 1). In the following days, Kurdish security forces rounded up suspects of an alleged IS sleeper cell, arresting four people linked to the attack. Security forces tracked down the suspects using a mobile phone signal ([Rudaw](#), August 4).

The presence of IS agents in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) territory is not a new phenomenon. Several radical Kurdish clerics with links to IS were arrested last year, and there are claims that as many as 500 Kurds joined the group in 2014 ([Rudaw](#), February 27, 2015;

see also [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 20, 2015). These agents, however, have staged few significant operations in the past.

The Bai Hasan attack was a serious blow, especially in the context of efforts against IS in Iraq. Even so, it was not as disruptive as it might have been.

The KRG has had responsibility for Bai Hasan since July 2014, after IS fighters drove out the Iraqi army from large parts of northern Iraq. Declining oil prices and a disagreement with Baghdad over oil revenues, which has seen the central government block funds due to the Kurds, have left the KRG mired in an economic crisis ([Kurdistan24](#), January 16). As a consequence, the KRG can ill afford for Bai Hasan, which produces 175,000 barrels a day, to be offline.

Though curtailed by U.S. airstrikes, IS has also benefited from oil sales, using smuggling networks in western Iraq and reportedly paying-off KRG middlemen ([Ekurd Daily](#), March 31). Possibly the group hoped to reap some financial benefit from the Bai Hasan attack – the attackers held the facility for more than an hour before peshmerga fighters were able to recapture it – but more likely it was a calculated move aimed at weakening the KRG

economically. With efforts against IS in Iraq continuing, there are likely to be more such attempts.

BRAZIL: JITTERY AHEAD OF THE OLYMPICS

Alexander Sehmer

Federal police in Brazil have arrested at least 12 people in connection with an alleged Islamic State (IS) cell, ahead of the Olympic Games. The arrests follow the emergence online of a group calling itself Ansar al-Khilafah Brazil, which declared allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in July, the first Latin American outfit to do so ([SITE](#), July 18).

On August 2, a pressure cooker filled with bolts and nails exploded in the parking lot of the Conjunto Nacional shopping mall, an incident police said had “indications” of a terror attack ([Correio Braziliense](#), August, 2). It is unclear who was behind the blast.

Brazil, which is hosting the Games amid its own unfolding political crisis, has little history of Islamist terrorism, but the threat of an attack appears real. In April, Brazilian intelligence confirmed the authenticity of a tweet by Maxime Hauchard, a French national who has appeared in IS beheading videos, in which he stated: “Brazil, you are our next target” ([EBC Agencia Brasil](#), April 14).

With a mounting number of attacks in Europe this summer, the Brazilian authorities are leaving little to chance. In July, they deported the French-Algerian physicist Adlene Hicheur ([20 Minutes](#), August 4). Hicheur, who was arrested and jailed in France in 2009 over alleged links to al-Qaeda, links he denies, was a researcher at the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Switzerland and had moved to Brazil nearly three years ago.

There was also concern in June when a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, Abu Wael Dhiab, who had been living in neighboring Uruguay, went missing supposedly having crossed into Brazil ([El Observador](#), June 18). He later turned up at the Uruguayan consulate in Venezuela.

Dhiab was among six Guantanamo detainees repatriated to Uruguay in 2014. The former detainees’ experiences in their new South American home are instructive. Initially welcomed, the men were treated as a media spectacle and have struggled to adjust to their new surroundings, due no doubt in part to their years in incarceration.

In fact, an online operation such as Ansar al-Khilafah Brazil, however amateur, is a greater threat to security during the Games. As with the recent incidents in Europe, an attack is most likely to be staged by an individual, radicalized online, and with few obvious ties to established terrorist networks.

A New Threat to Libya's Stability Emerges

Nathaniel Barr and Madeleine Blackman

While Islamic State (IS) is in decline in the central Libyan city of Sirte, another armed group with ties to the global jihadist movement is threatening to usher in a new period of instability in Libya. In a written statement posted on Twitter on June 2, commanders representing a number of Islamist militias in Libya announced the formation of the Benghazi Defense Companies (BDC), a group established to "defend [Benghazi] against the criminal followers of the former regime" ([Twitter](#), June 2). Soon after the statement was released, the BDC launched a military campaign against units aligned with the Libyan National Army (LNA), a fighting force led by the deeply polarizing Khalifa Hifter, which controls much of eastern Libya.

In recent months, the LNA has made considerable gains against Islamist and jihadist militias in Benghazi, but the BDC threatens to reverse these gains and throw Benghazi back into a state of total conflict. The BDC's ties with both jihadist groups and influential Libyan Islamist factions allow the group to draw support from a range of armed actors in Libya, making the BDC a potent military force. The BDC's operations also shed light upon al-Qaeda's covert strategy and growing influence within the Libyan militant landscape.

Al-Ghariani's Fighting Force

The BDC represents the latest effort by Islamist actors based in western Libya to weaken Hifter's grip on power in the east. The BDC's relationship with the Islamist coalition, which has been embroiled in a conflict with Hifter since May 2014, was revealed in the BDC's founding statement. According to the statement, the group's "sole source of reference regarding funding and fighting" was the *Dar al-Ifta* (Fatwa Office), a religious authority headed by Sheikh Sadiq al-Ghariani, who is recognized by some factions as Libya's Grand Mufti ([Twitter](#), June 2).

Al-Ghariani has been one of Hifter's leading critics, and he has repeatedly expressed support for Islamist and jihadist factions fighting against the LNA ([al-Monitor](#), June 11, 2014). Al-Ghariani has emerged as one of the

BDC's strongest advocates and has urged Libyan armed factions to unite behind the BDC ([YouTube](#), June 12).

An examination of the BDC's leadership cadre reveals further links between the group and the broader anti-Hifter coalition. Mustafa al-Sharkasi, one of the BDC's top field commanders, previously served as the spokesperson for the air force of the Islamist-dominated General National Congress (GNC).

Additionally, Ismail al-Salabi, another BDC official and the commander of the Benghazi-based Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade, has developed close ties with Islamist actors opposed to Hifter in western Libya (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), June 2).

The BDC and al-Qaeda

While the BDC has done little to hide its relationship with Islamist actors in western Libya, it has repeatedly asserted that it is unaffiliated with any "domestic or foreign organization." However, mounting evidence suggests that the BDC possesses ties with both local and regional jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda affiliates, and is collaborating with jihadist groups on the battlefield.

The BDC's intimate relationship with the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) – an Islamist coalition that includes the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia in Libya and several other figures associated with al-Qaeda – provides the clearest indication of the BDC's links with jihadist actors in Libya. In its founding statement, the BDC claimed that it would act "in conjunction" with the BRSC in the latter's fight against Hifter's forces in Benghazi. A day after its establishment, the BDC announced that the Bushra Media Establishment, a pro-BRSC online media group, would become the BDC's official media outlet. [1]

Several high-ranking BDC figures command forces that are either a part of, or are affiliated with, the BRSC. Ahmad al-Tajuri, one of the men who featured in a video announcing BDC's establishment, currently serves as the commander of BRSC forces in western Benghazi. Faraj Shiku, another BDC leader, also serves as the commander of the February 17 Martyrs Brigade, one of the key factions within the BRSC. [2]

In addition to its close ties with the BRSC, the BDC has received rhetorical support from al-Qaeda affiliates. On June 25, al-Qaeda-backed social media outlets launched an online messaging campaign praising the BRSC and urging militants from across Libya to join the fight in Benghazi. Several prominent al-Qaeda figures participated in the campaign, including Hisham al-Ash-mawy, the emir of the Egyptian group al-Murabitun, who praised militants in Benghazi for "defending Islam and its people in the face of the oppression and injustice," and beseeched others to support the "mujahideen brothers" in any way possible ([Twitter](#), June 29). Abdallah Muhammed al-Muhaysini, a leading jihadist ideologue based in Syria, similarly urged Libyans to "rush forth to support your brothers" in Benghazi. [3]

It is notable that none of the statements released during al-Qaeda's messaging campaign explicitly mentioned the BDC. Nevertheless, it is likely that the campaign was intended to generate support for the BDC, given the fact that the messaging initiative was launched just three weeks after BDC's establishment. Indeed, the fact that al-Qaeda officials never publicly expressed support for the BDC is consistent with al-Qaeda's efforts to mask its influence in Libya and across the globe. Al-Qaeda has calculated that concealing its relationship with local actors in North Africa and maintaining a covert presence will allow the group to expand without attracting the attention of counterterrorism forces.

Spoiler in Libya

In an article published this March in al-Masra, an al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula newsletter, Abu-Abd-al-laylah Ahmad, a senior al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) official, alluded to al-Qaeda's clandestine growth model in Libya ([Jihadology](#), March 15). Responding to a question about whether al-Qaeda had a branch in Libya, Ahmad explained that, for Libyan groups, pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda was of a lesser priority than combatting the "aggression" of the West and its local allies. Ahmad further explained that uniting all Libyan jihadist groups under al-Qaeda's banner would take "time, effort [and] sacrifices from all parties." Ahmad's statements illustrate that al-Qaeda has chosen not to reveal its ties with local groups, an approach that the group has likely maintained in the case of the BDC.

Another indication of al-Qaeda's clandestine relationship with the BDC and its allies emerged in late July, after the

BDC claimed to have shot down a helicopter carrying three French soldiers (some sources refute the BDC's claim, instead asserting that the helicopter crashed after a technical error). Several days after the incident, a statement attributed to the elusive al-Qaeda commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar was posted online ([Jihadology](#), July 23). After lambasting the French for intervening in North Africa and the Middle East, the author of the statement exhorted Libyans to "rally around their righteous scholars," and specifically praised Sheikh al-Ghariani for "exposing the truth in the face of falsehood."

The expression of support for al-Ghariani could be interpreted as an endorsement of the BDC, given the group's stated links with the Libyan sheikh, and it further illuminates the BDC's shadowy ties with al-Qaeda.

The BDC is now well positioned to play the role of spoiler in Libya's ongoing political negotiations.

As the new group continues its military offensive, it could disrupt United Nations-led efforts to bring Hifter and his allies to the negotiating table, instead galvanizing Hifter to pursue a military solution. This would further destabilize Libya and play directly into the hands of al-Qaeda, which continues to exploit civil conflict and chaos across the Middle East and North Africa.

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Why Islamic State Is Clinging on to the Syrian City of Manbij

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) officially launched its operation to take the city of Manbij on May 31. It is one of the most strategic and difficult operations the SDF – an alliance that includes Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) fighters as well as Syrian Arab groups – has undertaken to date.

In smaller cities, such as Shadadi, Sinjar, and Tal Abyad, the fight was over quickly, but in Manbij, it seems, Islamic State (IS) militants have decided to stand firm.

The SDF now controls over 70 percent of the city, and it appears IS could soon be defeated in Manbij. Nevertheless, the operation has been severely hampered by the presence of civilians, as well as thousands of landmines. It has been a tough fight for the SDF, with their forces going from house to house and from street to street. IS, it seems, wants to inflict heavy casualties on the SDF, forcing it to spend time recruiting and training new fighters for upcoming operations like in Raqqah and so delaying further operations against IS in the future.

Initial Delays

The operation for Manbij was delayed for several months from the outset because of Turkish government opposition. Initially, the SDF wanted to capture Jarabulus, but Turkey blocked the operation so instead the SDF moved towards the Tisreen dam ([Daily Sabah](#), June 2).

The Turkish government fears the Kurds will use the Manbij operation to create a unified territory along the Turkish border from the town of Derik all the way to Efrin in the northwest by uniting the three local administrations into one federal region. Until now, the IS-held territories and a small pocket of opposition-held territory in Azaz and Marea separated the Kurdish-held territories. But the Kurds hope to push further from Manbij to al-Bab, and eventually on to Efrin.

Despite Turkish opposition, the U.S.-led coalition

backed the SDF in order to annihilate IS and limit the flow of foreign fighters. According to French intelligence, about 100 foreigners continue to enter Syria from Turkey each week to join IS ([Reuters](#), July 20). Kurdish officials suspect that Turkey is turning a blind eye in order to weaken the SDF forces in Manbij, and they even accuse Ankara of supplying weapons to IS. Turkey has always denied any form of support for IS ([Daily Sabah](#), August 12, 2015).

Heavy Losses

It is unsurprising that IS is putting up a fierce fight for Manbij. The city is the most important corridor for the group to the outside world.

Syrian anti-government insurgent groups have not been able to push towards Jarabulus and are less of a threat to the group as they are largely focused on the fight against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In contrast, the Kurdish-led SDF forces are almost solely focused on tackling IS.

The fight has been costly for the SDF forces, with weekly funerals in towns such as Kobani, Qamislo, and Amude. A number of senior commanders have been killed, including Faysal Abu Layla, who was leading operations in Manbij until he was shot and killed by a sniper on June 3 ([ARAnews](#), June 6).

Partly in consequence, the local administration in the town of Kobani implemented an unpopular conscription law just after the operation started ([ARAnews](#), June 21). Now conscripted fighters protect the city of Kobani, while more experienced fighters are deployed to Manbij city. That has had consequences. On July 28, due to security gaps, more than 50 civilians were killed in an IS attack in Qamishli ([ARAnews](#), July 28). Most of the Kurdish security police were away assisting the Manbij operation.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 214 SDF fighters have been killed so far, but in reality this figure could be higher ([SOHR](#), August 2). The SDF is known to have had to bring in reinforcements from the Hasakah province due to heavy losses.

Laying Siege to Manbij

The SDF expected an internal uprising by Arabs from Manbij. Such a rebellion was promised by local Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups, which claimed that they had weapons and people inside the city. This has failed to materialize. As a consequence, the SDF was forced to dig in and besiege the city, but IS militants inside Manbij, for whom there was no escape, seemed well-prepared for a lengthy battle and have deployed snipers and used civilians as human shields.

According to a senior SDF official, initially the plan had been to leave a corridor open for civilians to escape and IS fighters to retreat from the city. [1] IS instead used the corridor to bring in reinforcements.

“So, ISIS were getting reinforcements and weapons, that’s why we completely surrounded the city. For ISIS, there are only two solutions: surrender, or die,” a SDF official was quoted as saying, using an alternative acronym for Islamic State ([ARAnews](#), July 31). “In the past, we didn’t make a full siege on cities.”

The SDF has also offered IS two opportunities to allow civilians to leave Manbij city, but so far IS has not responded.

According to the SDF official, Manbij is too strategic a prize for IS to walk away.

“After the capture of Manbij, the existence of ISIS [in Syria] will be under threat. It’s not a tactical battle, but a strategic one quite different from Tal Abyad, and Shadadi,” he said.

“If Manbij is captured by the SDF, the relation between ISIS and the Turkey [border] and the countryside of Aleppo, will be cut,” he added.

Fateful Campaign

In September 2014, IS made the mistake of attacking Kobani, losing thousands of fighters in the process. According to some estimates, IS lost 4,000 to 5,000 fighters in Kobani ([Daily Beast](#), November 16, 2015). “The disregard for the lives of their own soldiers in Kobani is one of the key causes for their downfall,” a Jabhat al-Nusra member said. [2]

Now, it appears that IS is hoping the SDF will make a similar mistake. With the city surrounded, Manbij is a

battle IS will inevitably lose, but in the meantime the group is intent on inflicting major casualties on the SDF, in the hope of weakening them and eroding their ability to conduct operations elsewhere.

Unlike battles elsewhere, IS has not fled. Instead it has tried to break the siege with counter-offensives from the direction of al-Bab, Raqqah (including Ayn al-Issa, and near Tisreen dam), and Jarabulus. It has also attempted to undermine the campaign against it further by spreading disinformation about civilian deaths from coalition airstrikes through its semi-official news agency, Amaq ([SITE](#), August 2).

As a consequence, the Syrian opposition has called for a halt to airstrikes, but the U.S.-led coalition has promised to continue the battle and support the SDF-forces.

Mounting SDF casualties have led to calls from rival Kurdish parties for Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga forces, receiving training in neighboring Iraq, to return to the country. This, however, is unlikely to happen as the SDF refuses to allow them to join the fight as a separate military force.

Ultimately, the Manbij operation will provide a great deal of intelligence to the U.S.-led coalition and help to isolate Raqqah, IS' de facto capital, from the Turkish border. It could also have longer-term consequences for the region by giving SDF-forces the opportunity to unite their local administrations into one federal area.

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NOTES

[1] Author's interview with Dr. Nassir Haji Mansour, a senior SDF official (July 13, 2016)

[2] See: <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2016/06/26/thoughts-on-the-ideology-of-the-global-jihad-movement-embodied-by-al-qaeda-2/>

Al-Shabaab Leader's First Audio Message Suggests Morale Is Low Among Somali Militants

Sunguta West

After nearly two years of silence, al-Shabaab leader Sheikh Ahmad Umar Abu Ubaidah has released his first audio message, a fiery rant that appears aimed at motivating his beleaguered fighters as they battle African Union (AU) troops in southern Somalia.

The 44-minute audio recording, released on July 12 in time for the Eid al-Fitr holiday, comes nearly two years after Umar took over as emir of al-Shabaab.

Delivered in Somali and titled "Sharia or Martyrdom" (two areas supposedly highly valued by al-Shabaab members), the message has been widely circulated on social media and broadcast on Radio Andalus, a channel associated with the militant group.

The message singled out the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the firepower of which has been destroying the group's bases, killing thousands of fighters and sending others fleeing across the southern region. Umar also specifically threatened Turkey, the first time the country has been explicitly named as an enemy in a media message from the Somali militants.

Ahmad Umar Abu Ubaidah

Umar, a member of the minority Dir clan, is believed to be in his early 40s and is known to be a hardliner within the movement (WardheerNews, September 10, 2014). He was born in the Kalafe area of the Ogaden region before moving to southern Somalia, where he helped establish Islamic schools. He also served as al-Shabaab's governor for the Bay and Bakool regions (Somali Current, September 6).

A religious hardliner who goes by a number of aliases, including Ahmad Diriye and Abu Ubaidah, Umar took over the leadership of al-Shabaab following the death of the group's supreme leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, on September 6, 2014. Godane, a supporter of global ji-

had, had been killed in a U.S. airstrike a few days earlier (Daily Nation, September 5, 2014). The statement declaring Umar as the new leader of al-Shabaab and also restated al-Shabaab's allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Before he gained the leadership, Umar was a little known cleric and allegedly a member of the *amniyat*, a secret intelligence group Godane formed to expose and eliminate dissidents within al-Shabaab. He is also believed to have participated in a purge of dissidents ordered by Godane.

While analysts expected the cleric to leap into the saddle with his finger on the trigger, there was an uncomfortable silence in the weeks and months following his appointment, sparking speculation that the poorly educated cleric lacked the leadership skills to establish himself (Sabahi, October 31, 2014).

In 2015, the United States offered a \$6 million bounty for information that could lead to the capture of Umar (Hiiraan Online, November 11, 2015).

Taking on Turkey

In his message, Umar referred to Turkey as the "enemy nation." He charged that Turkey had invaded Somalia economically and brought about economic collapse. Turkey's aim, according to Umar, is to keep the war-torn horn of Africa nation in poverty.

Umar's attack on Turkey is a result of increased Turkish involvement in Somalia. Turkey has significantly increased its activities in the country, funding reconstruction work and providing aid for thousands of people displaced by the fighting.

In June, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan travelled to Mogadishu as part of an African tour, where he signed key investment deals with the Federal Government of Somalia and opened one of the country's largest embassies (Daily Nation, July 13). Al-Shabaab appears to have taken exception to these actions, with the group consequently heightening its attacks on Turkish interests in the country.

A day before Erdogan's arrival in Mogadishu, suicide attackers, believed to have been sent by Umar, blew-up a vehicle near a hotel where Turkish delegates were

staying. Two police officers were killed in the attack, their deaths claimed by the group. (Somtribune, June 2, 2016)

Earlier this year, gunmen from the militant group opened fire on vehicles transporting doctors, killing two Turkish and three Somali medics.

Al-Shabaab has targeted Turkish interests before. In 2013, al-Shabaab militants drove a vehicle loaded with explosives into a business premises accommodating Turkish embassy staff. The attack, claimed by the group, left three people dead (Africa.tvnews.tv, July 28, 2013).

Weakened but Still Deadly

In his audio message, Umar also turned his attention to AMISOM, describing the AU troops as an occupying force, invaders and "Christian crusaders" that Somalis had accepted only after being "deceived" by the international community into believing it was a peace-keeping force. He added that the troops aim was to plunder Somalia resources.

AMISOM's 22,000-strong force includes a police unit, but the main military component is made up of 5,432 troops from Burundi, 1,000 from Djibouti, 3,664 from Kenya, 850 from Sierra Leone, 4,395 from Ethiopia and 6,223 from Uganda. It is the biggest combat force ever deployed by AU, and it has a number of successes against al-Shabaab in the nine years it has been deployed.

Until AMISOM's intervention in 2007, al-Shabaab had controlled large swathes of central and southern Somalia, including strategic towns and ports on the Indian Ocean, which allowed the group to earn revenue (Namibian Sun, September 30, 2015).

Al-Shabaab's major sources of income include taxation and extortion in the areas and towns it controls. With territorial control came control of commerce, illegal charcoal export, and import of contrabands through the seaports. Relief agencies working in Somalia have also been targets in the group's extortion rackets. Al-Shabaab also receives contributions through the *hawalas* (an informal system of transferring money) and support of groups following a similar Islamist ideology, such as, al-Qaeda (Kenya Today, September 30, 2013; Somalia-Report July 24, 2011).

Weakened by persistent AMISOM attacks, as well as its own internal divisions, al-Shabaab has lost ground, including strategic towns and seaports along the Indian Ocean like the lucrative port of Kismayo. The loss of these towns has been a big blow to the group's finances (New Vision, December 1, 2015). It has also been hit by desertions, in particular by foreign fighters who have recently been leaving to join Islamic State (The Star, April 28).

Now, it can be argued the group is feeling the squeeze, as AMISOM troops take control of the towns, cutting off trade routes and ending the illegal taxation system in its towns (Daily Nation, July 7, 2014).

Suicide Attacks

Nonetheless, with Umar at the helm, al-Shabaab has executed some of its most deadly attacks. It has turned to suicide and surprise attacks on government interests and allies, with a fair degree of success (Shabelle News, July 13; Daily Nation March 10).

Al-Shabaab's suicide attacks have been concentrated in the capital Mogadishu, where AU troops forced out al-Shabaab fighters in 2011. In the latest incident, a twin car bomb attack killed 13 people near the entrance of Mogadishu's airport on July 26. At present, an attack occurs in the capital nearly every day (Africanews, July 26, 2013).

In July 2015, nearly a year after gaining the leadership, Umar made public his intention to escalate al-Shabaab attacks beyond Somalia, just like his predecessor Godane. In an Eid message in July 2015, he called on new recruits to help "lift the pain of Muslims" across East Africa (eNCA, July 17, 2015).

He had warned that the "mujahedeen's swords" were drawn and welcomed attacks against the enemy countrywide, but called for further attacks against the "infidels." He singled out Kenya, warning of further attacks and promising that the militants would continue to help their brothers living under "colonization" in Kenya.

This is also the first time he mentioned the Garissa University College attack, one of the most deadly in Kenya's history. Umar praised the attack in which four militants armed with AK47s stormed the college, killing 148 peo-

ple, the majority of them Christian students. He sought to justify the attack, calling it revenge for what he claimed was the organized killing of Muslim clerics and disappearance of Muslim youth in Kenya (eNCA, July 17, 2015).

Tactical Shift

Despite AMISOM's hard-won gains, al-Shabaab has seen some recent successes, due in part to a change in its tactics. About a year ago, al-Shabaab started using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) to breach AMISOM camps. The strategy was first seen June 2015, when al-Shabaab successfully broke into a base manned by Burundian soldiers in Lego village, in Lower Shabelle region. Similar attacks have since been used to target bases hosting Ugandan, Kenyan, and Ethiopian troops.

The latest raid on foreign troops occurred in June of this year, when the militants targeted an Ethiopian army base in Halgan, in Hiran region, central Somalia. The group claimed it had killed 43 Ethiopia soldiers, while Ethiopia claimed it killed more than 100 jihadist attackers (The Star, June 9).

The attack started after suicide bombers exploded a VBIED at the entry into the base, allowing fighters to make their way into the base (The East African, June 9). The group has used the strategy on a number of earlier occasions, including in a devastating attack in January, when between 70-100 militants used vehicles loaded with explosives to over-run a Kenyan base in El-Adde in southern Somalia. The attack, which the militants executed in three waves, is believed to have killed more than 100 soldiers, although Kenya has never made public the number of soldiers killed. Kenya's intelligence agents have, though, drawn parallels with the recent Paris attacks, Libya, and the Westgate attack from 2013 (The Standard, January 21). The vehicle used in the attack is believed to have been looted during the attacks on Burundi and Ugandan bases the year before.

A Ugandan camp in Jenale was targeted in September 2015, with reports indicating more than 50 soldiers were killed. Al-Shabaab claimed that more than 70 people were killed in the attack. The militants again used a suicide car bomb to ram the base, and then they sent in more than 200 militants to overrun the camp (Daily Nation, September 2, 2015; Observer, September 2, 2015).

In the Burundi attack, an estimated 45 Burundian soldiers were killed. AMISOM confirmed that attack in which the groups said it had confiscated vehicles and heavy weapons (Radio Dalsan, June 26, 2015).

Protracted Conflict

Al-Shabaab has been weakened and dispersed by AMISOM, but it is not yet defeated. The group remains dangerous and the conflict with AMISOM will be bloody and protracted, with some warning it could last more than three decades (New Vision, March 7).

Al-Shabaab's use of suicide bombers, roadside Improvised Explosive Devices and VBIEDs has delivered some recent successes for the group, although AMISOM's own weaknesses, including underfunding and an inadequate command structure, may have contributed to these success (Africa Review, January 24).

The unexpected release of Umar's recorded message is possibly an attempt by the militant leader to capitalize on these recent successes, and an attempt to inspire further attacks. Given Umar's earlier two-year silence, it may also be a tacit acknowledgement that, after substantial territorial losses at the hands of AMISOM, the morale of his fighters has been in decline.

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