

Terrorism Monitor

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AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN DIVISIONS A BOON FOR ISLAMIC STATE

Alexander Sehmer

Gunmen in Afghanistan's Jowzjan Province killed six aid workers with the International Committee of the Red Cross on February 8. Two other members of the eight-person team — which consisted of five Red Cross staff and three drivers — were reported missing following the attack ([1TV](#), February 8). The Taliban denied any responsibility for the incident, and local officials have attributed it instead to fighters with Islamic State (IS) ([Channel NewsAsia](#), February 8).

The IS presence in Afghanistan has been concentrated in Nangarhar Province, but several IS factions are thought to be active in Jowzjan, in northern Afghanistan. They emerged early last year, and their activities have since steadily increased, with Afghan authorities arresting Mullah Baz Mohammad, described as IS' "shadow governor" of Jowzjan, who had apparently travelled to the province from Nangarhar in order to bolster recruitment ([Tolo](#), August 17, 2016; [1TV](#), August 17, 2016).

In December, Afghan security forces killed a senior IS commander in Jowzjan following an attack on a checkpoint ([Afghanistan Times](#), December 4, 2016). Later that month, following a clash with police, IS fighters raided a village in Darzab district, killing three people and taking two children captive ([Pajhwok](#), December 27, 2016).

While IS in Afghanistan remains less of a threat than the Taliban, the group has been able to take advantage of a growing disarray among the Taliban leadership to extend its operations.

Following the death of the divisive [Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour](#) in a drone strike in Pakistan in May, the Taliban appointed [Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada](#) as its new leader (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), November 1, 2016, [Gandhara](#), May 25, 2016). Haibatullah, a conservative cleric rather than a political actor, was intended to appeal to competing factions within the Taliban and dispel the suspicion among many of the rank and file that the insurgency had become corrupt and lost its way. He has so far struggled to do this.

Instead, he has fallen increasingly under the influence of Sirajuddin Haqqani and the Haqqani network (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), September 30, 2016). Meanwhile, the

faction belonging to former-leader Mansour — now led by the Taliban governor of Helmand, Mullah Mohammed Rahim — has grown to become the most powerful within the group, in large part as a result of its access to the lucrative opium trade.

These divisions could be exploited by international actors as an opportunity to re-start peace talks with the group, which fell apart in 2015. Pakistan, eager to maintain its influence on the process, has in recent months put pressure on the Taliban to do just that ([Pajhwok](#), November 2, 2016).

Diplomats and politicians, however, will need to move quickly. The Taliban's divisions are also an opportunity for IS, which recruits from a growing pool of disaffected Taliban members, to make gains.

PHILIPPINES: COMMUNIST REBELS STEP UP ATTACKS AS CEASEFIRE ENDS

Alexander Sehmer

A six-month ceasefire in the Philippines between the government and communist rebels recently broke down, putting in jeopardy talks aimed at bringing an end to the long-running insurgency and raising fears of increased guerrilla attacks in the Philippines countryside.

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) announced an end to its unilateral ceasefire with the government on February 1, claiming the government had used the deal to encroach on its territory and had failed to make good on promises to release jailed rebels ([Philippine Daily Inquirer](#), February 2). Two days later, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared an end to the government's own ceasefire ([Manila Times](#), February 3). Clashes between the military and the CPP's armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), ensued ([Philippines Daily Inquirer](#), February 6).

The government has since amped up the rhetoric, with Duterte branding the NPA "terrorists" ([Manila Times](#), February 7). Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana compared the NPA to Abu Sayyaf and warned of "all-out war" ([Manila Times](#), February 8).

The conflict between the government and the communists has dragged on for decades. The NPA, established in March 1969, was initially formed by a band of poorly armed former rebels in villages in central Luzon. The area's struggling peasant farmers were receptive to the communists' message, and the movement expanded rapidly to set up numerous local cadres throughout the island. From there, it spread to the provinces.

The NPA's political philosophy has developed little in the subsequent decades, and its numbers have long since declined. Defense Secretary Lorenzana put NPA membership at about 5,000 in a recent media briefing — more than the army's official estimate of 3,700 members, but far from its Cold War peak of nearly 25,000 ([Philippine Star](#), February 7).

While the NPA may offer little politically these days, it can still cause mayhem in the rural areas in which it operates — largely Luzon in the north and Mindanao in the south. Guerrillas abducted four people in Maco in Com-

postela Valley province on February 5, according to the military ([Philippine Daily Inquirer](#), February 10). Fighters also abducted three people, one of them a police officer, and set fire to construction vehicles in Bukidnon province on February 9 ([Philippine Daily Inquirer](#), February 10). A day earlier, fighters killed a soldier in Cagayan province.

Ceasefires between the NPA and the government have been made and broken since the 1980s and there are still prospects for talks. Before the ceasefire broke down, negotiations between the two sides, which may still go ahead, were due to take place in Norway in April. In the meantime, however, the Philippines is likely to see a stepped-up hit-and-run campaign carried out by the NPA.

Senegal Boosts Security Measures to Combat AQIM Threat

Jessica Moody

A series of large-scale attacks by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) over the last few years, targeting mainly tourists in West African countries with a French or international presence, has raised the question of when and where the next AQIM attack will take place.

In March 2016, the group launched a spectacular assault in Cote d'Ivoire's beach-resort town of Grand Bassam, just outside the economic capital, Abidjan ([Koaci](#), March 14, 2016). Four months earlier, in November 2015, a siege attack on a hotel in Bamako, Mali left more than 20 people dead ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 20, 2015). Soon after, another attack on a hotel and café in neighboring Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, claimed a further 20 lives ([Le Faso](#), January 16, 2016).

Many analysts thought Senegal the likely next target. Dakar, the capital, with its sizeable expatriate population and array of French business interests, was considered to be particularly high on AQIM's target-list. Saly, the Senegalese beach resort, and Saint-Louis, a world-heritage site in the country's north, were also among potential targets.

So far, however, Senegal has managed to evade an AQIM attack, but there remain serious vulnerabilities that the militants could still exploit.

Heightened Security Measures

Since the Burkina Faso attack, Senegal has bolstered security around major towns and critical infrastructure ([RFI](#), January 25, 2016). The number of security personnel operating in Dakar has increased over the last year, and their presence is more visible. [1] Heightened security is particularly apparent at the hotels and restaurants frequented by foreigners, as well as at seaports and airports. The government itself has provided additional armed police for major tourist attractions in Dakar, including Sea Plaza and the Radisson Blu hotel. There has also been an increase in the number of security checks carried out on vehicles, in an effort to prevent would-be-

militants travelling into Senegal from neighboring countries carrying weapons in their cars. [2]

Perhaps in a bid to demonstrate the thoroughness of their attempts, security checks in and around Dakar involve drivers and passengers getting out of their vehicle while the police carry out a search. This may be a response to some local media reports about the Grand Bassam attack, which said the gunmen who carried out the attack had remained undetected by border security despite using the same car to travel to Burkina Faso and Mali ([20 Minutes](#), May 27, 2016).

Intelligence cooperation has also been a major feature of the preparation for a potential terrorist attack, with government officials stating they prioritize this over the augmentation of physical defenses.

This is reasonable, given the nature of many of the AQIM attacks so far. Hit-and-run style assaults are difficult to prevent solely with physical security as they require personnel to be located in every possible target location at all times. Advanced intelligence techniques, however, may be able to prevent these assaults before they reach the final implementation stage.

Dakar has an intelligence-sharing agreement with the United States and France, as well as other countries in the region. Senegalese Foreign Minister Mankeur Ndiaye has also signed a defense partnership that would allow the U.S. military to use Senegal as a staging ground in the case of a humanitarian or security problem ([dakar.usembassy.gov](#), May 2, 2016).

Meanwhile, security officials have taken steps to use Senegal's own population more effectively to collect intelligence ([Agence de Presse Senegalaise](#), March 31, 2016). Foreign ministry officials say a substantial effort is under way to increase awareness among the population of the threat posed by AQIM fighters, and to encourage them to report suspicious behavior.

Limited Effect

These moves have, thus far, effectively counteracted the potential for a Grand Bassam, Ouagadougou or Bamako-style attack. Despite the very public security efforts, however, there are some apparent limitations.

Security checks in Dakar and other cities in Senegal, including the popular tourist destination of Saint-Louis, are haphazard. Even taking into consideration the authorities' expressed preference for intelligence over increased "boots on the ground," there are no inspections before entering most restaurants, bars, beaches or hotels, meaning access to these areas continues to be unrestricted for potential AQIM militants.

This is an oversight given the potential for lone-wolf, AQIM-inspired attacks taking place in Senegal. Such an assault would, as is invariably the case, be extremely difficult for intelligence officials to pick up on, and requires strong physical security measures if it is to be prevented. Lone-wolf attacks have become much more common in recent years, with a number of IS-inspired incidents taking place around the world, such as the Ohio State University attack in November 2016, and the attack in Berlin in December 2016, which saw a Tunisian individual with links to IS hijack a truck and drive it into a Christmas market ([Deutsche Welle](#), December 28, 2016; [CNN](#), November 28, 2016).

Such an attack would require a degree of domestic radicalization. Senegal's Sufi sects have been an effective bulwark against radicalization for many years, with the majority of the population belonging to one of the four main "brotherhoods" and carefully following the teaching of the *Marabout* (sect leader) ([Timbuktu Institute](#), October 2016). The close ties between members has acted as a useful check on those who may have otherwise strayed toward radicalization, but there are indications that these bonds are loosening ([Timbuktu Institute](#), October 2016).

A growing sense of disenchantment among segments of the population — those with limited access to economic and educational opportunities offered by the government — boosts concerns of radicalization in Senegal. According to World Bank figures from 2010, 47 percent of Senegal's population lives below the poverty line, though this figure is falling ([World Bank Data](#), July 2010). This sense of disenfranchisement due to limited opportunity may inspire some Senegalese, particularly those living in the impoverished suburbs of Dakar, to turn toward radical Islamic groups like AQIM.

To a limited degree this has already happened, with a number of extremist imams arrested in early 2016 and reports emerging that between 10 and 30 Senegalese

citizens have left the country to fight for Islamic State in Libya ([Koaci](#), 26 January, 2016; [Timbuktu Institute](#), October 2016).

The prevalence of drug smuggling in the region, closely connected to Islamic extremist networks, exacerbates the growing problem of domestic radicalization. Drug trafficking networks from Guinea Bissau, Mali and Mauritania all use Senegal as a transit country ([UNODC](#), October 27, 2011). The large sums of money to be gained from this enterprise provides an additional pull factor to would-be militants in Senegal. The presence of smuggling networks and porous borders also heightens the possibility that fighters already using well-established smuggling routes could gain easy access into Senegal.

Watching and Waiting

The last major AQIM attack on tourists or expatriates in West Africa occurred in Cote d'Ivoire in March 2016. Nearly a year later, it might be argued that if AQIM were indeed planning an operation similar to the Cote d'Ivoire attack, they would have already made their move. The sudden increase in security throughout the region, particularly in the aftermath of the Grand Bassam assault, has likely made launching another attack more difficult. Alternatively, AQIM may simply be waiting for a lull before carrying out further violence on vulnerable tourist infrastructure in West Africa.

Senegal has undertaken some valuable measures to insure itself against an AQIM attack, but the country's position in a "bad neighborhood" with lax border security and a growing level of domestic radicalization suggests it may not be able to avoid an assault forever.

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NOTES

[1] This article was informed by discussions the author had with Senegalese officials in Dakar between August and October 2016.

[2] Author interview with Miriam Frost, security analyst with Save the Children, Dakar (September 20, 2016)

The 'Khasavyurt Group': A New Watershed of Islamic State Activity in Dagestan

Neil Hauer

The discovery of what appears to be a sizeable Islamic State (IS) cell in the Russian city of Khasavyurt, located in the North Caucasian republic of Dagestan, has sparked numerous violent confrontations as long-simmering tensions between Russian authorities and adherents of Salafism in the region erupt once again into open hostilities.

While the extent of the previously unknown group is still to be fully determined, its discovery has put the city of Khasavyurt at the heart of an Islamist insurgency and could mark the most acute IS penetration of the Caucasus region to date.

The Khasavyurt Group

On December 29, 2016, sources within the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced that seven IS fighters had been detained at an unspecified location in Dagestan (Ren TV, December 29, 2016). The militants were allegedly planning a series of Bataclan-style attacks in Moscow, in which armed suicide bombers would have opened fire on public gatherings during New Year's celebrations before detonating their suicide belts. The detainees, all natives of the Khasavyurt region, had allegedly received training in Syria before returning home. The FSB claimed the attacks had been planned on the orders of IS leaders in Syria, seeking to exact revenge for Russia's participation in the conflict there (RBC, December 29, 2016).

An FSB statement described the detained militants as part of the "Khasavyurt Group," a previously unknown extremist cell in the western Dagestani city of Khasavyurt (Ren TV, January 1, 2017). The FSB says the group is linked to IS, but until the arrests in December had remained unknown to the authorities and had not appeared on any government watch lists (Caucasian Knot, December 30, 2016).

In the evening on December 29, another three militants in Khasavyurt were killed in a shootout with police (Cau-

casian Knot, December 30, 2016). Further fighting broke out in the village of Yamansu, 15 kilometers (km) southwest of Khasavyurt, on January 1. In that encounter, police shot dead two more insurgents also said to be part of the Khasavyurt Group, which at that point police estimated had only about ten members remaining (Caucasian Knot, January 1; RBC, December 29, 2016).

Violent incidents continued to unfold in Khasavyurt and across the region throughout January. Security forces shot dead two more Khasavyurt Group members on the outskirts of Kizlyar, 60 km north of Khasavyurt, on January 21 (Caucasian Knot, January 21). Another three militants were killed in Khasavyurt itself in a security operation on January 29 (Caucasian Knot, January 29).

The total number of militants killed and detained in Khasavyurt since December 29 suggests a group of unusual size and ambition for the region.

Numbers from media reports of security operations indicate a total of seven militants detained and 10 others killed in battles with police. It is likely not all of these fighters are necessarily members of the Khasavyurt Group, as there is some incentive for local security forces to inflate their successes and embellish the figures. Even by conservative estimates, however, the group appears to have at least initially consisted of more than 20 individuals. That would make it one of the larger militant cells in the North Caucasus in recent years. The group's plans to conduct attacks in Moscow and speculative links to a large training camp discovered in the forests southeast of Khasavyurt suggest it could be even larger (Caucasian Knot, November 30, 2016).

Local Tensions Inflamed

Prior to the events of the past year, Khasavyurt itself was not considered particularly vulnerable to Salafist militancy.

Despite regular clashes throughout the region between militants and security services, Khasavyurt remained largely untouched by the violence there. In August and September 1999, the city's hinterland was notably the location at which local Dagestani militants aided federal security forces in repulsing an incursion by Chechen rebels commanded by Shamil Basayev (Moscow Defense Brief, 2001). The establishment of the Khasavyurt Group, however, represents the natural evolution of the

ongoing battle between local political authorities and Salafist Islamists in Dagestan.

Tensions have been building for years as the influx of hardline Islamist thought has, in some areas, displaced traditional Sufism. In Khasavyurt itself, those tensions manifested most clearly in early 2016, when local authorities attempted to close the Severnaya and Vostochnaya mosques, the two largest Salafist mosques in the city.

Authorities claimed the attempted closure of the Severnaya mosque was due to its reputation as a recruiting ground for IS. Growing protests on the matter culminated in a march on January 31, 2016 that drew thousands of civilian demonstrators, primarily young men, onto the streets. One participant claimed that IS elements had tried to convince protesters to take up arms and "declare jihad on the authorities" (Meduza, February 24, 2016).

While the mosques were eventually allowed to remain open, the atmosphere in the city is one of suspicion. The authorities regard large segments of the local populace as potential militants under the sway of Salafist imams, while the strength of the protests indicated the necessary civilian support mechanisms for an insurgency — sympathetic elements of the population willing to aid potential militants — already exists.

Authorities in Dagestan maintain a list of "Wahhabists" — civilians they deem to be budding terrorists (Human Rights Watch, June 2015). The list includes 100,000 individuals (out of a population of three million), each of whom can expect persistent harassment from security forces. That kind of treatment may be counter-productive, as noted by the assistant imam at the Vostochnaya mosque, Murad Dibirov. He invoked the volatile "Caucasian temperament" and spoke of the pride a young person might have upon seeing his countryman, having joined the jihad in Syria, "on a tank with a machine gun, having found total freedom" (Meduza, February 24, 2016).

Islamic State in the Caucasus

The events in Khasavyurt mark one incidence of a growing IS presence in the Northeast Caucasus.

In Ingushetia in October, following a shootout with security forces, authorities killed an IS emissary sent from Syria to establish a new IS cell there (NTV, October 10, 2016). Chechnya has also seen a spate of militant activity in recent months, including a shootout in the capital Grozny that marked the worst fighting in the city in two years. In December, five militants infiltrated the city and opened fire on police along the main boulevard, in an attack later claimed by IS (RBC, December 20, 2016). Following the attack, in mid-January, Chechnya saw the largest counterterrorism operation in the Republic in years, as authorities searched for militants in several districts south and east of Grozny (Kavkaz.Realii, January 11).

The degree to which IS is really involved in the creation and direction of terror cells in the Caucasus is likely limited. While it has largely displaced the Caucasus Emirate, the traditional vehicle for insurgent activities in the region, IS probably serves more as a brand, one to which local militants can declare affiliation, rather than a true franchise operating with a hierarchical chain of command. This is borne out by local experts, who point to the shootout with supposed IS-linked militants in Grozny in December and note that a true IS-organized cell would likely have been provided with better weaponry (OnKavkaz, December 19, 2016).

Prospects for Future Conflict

Insurgent activity in Dagestan is once again on the rise. Officials in Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital, recently estimated there are 1,200 Dagestanis fighting for IS in Syria, while deaths from the conflict in Dagestan rose 33 percent in 2016 (Caucasian Knot, January 31). January alone has seen Dagestan mount five counterterrorism operations, several of them aimed at countering the Khasavyurt Group.

With the Caucasus Emirate now nearly defunct, local security forces have noted militants adopting a compartmentalized structure (Life News, 9 January, 2017). Individual cells often contain as few as two or three militants. In that respect, the Khasavyurt Group's size sets it apart from other militant organizations in the region, but the degree of IS control is still yet to be determined.

The discovery of the group has put Khasavyurt city at the center of an Islamist extremist insurgency in Dages-

tan. While the cell has been weakened, it will likely resurface in the weeks and months to come.

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Taking on Turkey: Islamic State's New Frontier

Yasir Kuoti

In November, as Iraqi forces backed by U.S.-led coalition air support closed in on the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a fretful call to his supporters, exhorting them to conduct attacks in Turkey.

Islamic State (IS) has recently experienced substantial losses following the start of the Mosul offensive in October last year, including being forced out of the city's east side in January. The IS leader's call was likely intended to deflect from his organization's defeats.

The declaration of all-out war on Turkey is a bold and arguably foolhardy move by the group. It heralds a new era in IS' campaign, exacerbates Turkey's long-strained relations with its Kurdish population and brings with it significant security and economic repercussions for Turkey and beyond.

'This Is What God Has Promised Us'

On November 3, 2016, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered an unexpected speech entitled "This Is What God Has Promised Us." The speech served as a motivational call to IS fighters in Mosul, and occasioned the cry for establishing a new frontier – effectively a war with Turkey.

"O monotheists," al-Baghdadi said, "Turkey has today entered the sphere of your work and your jihadi project. Turn its security into panic, its luxury into dread, and include it in your blazing areas of struggle" (al-Naba, Issue 53, 03 November, 2016).

Just a day later, IS claimed responsibility for a deadly suicide bombing in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir that killed nine people and wounded more than 100 others.

That IS should seek to expand into Turkey is, on one level, unsurprising. At its most fundamental, the group's worldview is expansionist and apocalyptic and seeks, ultimately, to obtain global domination beginning with the countries of the Muslim world.

Such a worldview is informed by the Arabic mantra *baqiya wa tatamadad* ("remaining and expanding"), which suggests the group considers itself to have a kind of divine mission to expand into new territories.

However, IS expansion has so far been more-or-less limited to failed or semi-failed states. Noteworthy announcements of expansion into new areas of operation have also tended to follow periods of success in existing areas, possibly serving to communicate visible successes to locals in the territories into which the group is expanding.

Al-Baghdadi's recent call, then, is unusual. Not only because it comes on the heels of losing territories in Syria, Iraq and Libya, but also because Turkey is a functional state.

Another difference with IS' other expansionist announcements is that al-Baghdadi did not disclose details of local leadership hierarchies or strongholds. There are obvious reasons for this. First, unlike the states IS usually preys upon, Turkey has functional security services that could efficiently identify and arrest IS leaders and operatives. Secondly, the IS leadership is under pressure. The group has finite personnel and resources, and is increasingly in survival mode.

Justification for Violence

At the core of IS efforts to legitimize its expansion of terror into Turkey is the promotion of a narrative that Islam faces an existential threat from a multitude of adversaries that inevitably include crusading Christians and Zionist Jews.

These enemies, so the IS narrative goes, aided by apostate Muslim governments such as that in Turkey, are the principle hurdle to creating an alternative world order based on Islamic teachings, or more accurately one based on IS' Salafist version of Islam.

IS uses this narrative of clashing civilizations to justify its attacks on Muslim countries.

To justify targeting Turkey, IS regularly publishes catalogues and provides analysis of the "faults by successive Turkish governments dating back to 1944." These include joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which it considers un-Islamic as it "exhibits loy-

alty and agency to the crusaders in their fight against Islam”; constitutionally adopting secularism in 1983, which requires the separation of mosque and state; and joining the global anti-IS coalition in 2014 (al-Naba, Issue 14, January 18, 2016; al-Naba, Issue 57, December 01, 2016).

According to IS, Turkey is also at fault for joining the United Nations, as the group sees the UN Charter as un-Islamic for affording dignity and worth for every person irrespective of faith or creed. From an IS standpoint, the human worth of a believer and nonbeliever cannot be equated.

Pragmatism on Both Sides

During IS’ early successes in Iraq and Syria, Turkey emerged as a key transit center for those seeking to join the group, its borders crossed by radicals and potential jihadists arriving from Asia, Europe, Russia, North Africa and elsewhere.

At that stage, Turkey and IS were careful not to overtly carry out operations against each another. When either did, they took care to ensure deniability. This prompted criticism from observers who claimed it equated to a cooperative relationship between IS and Turkey (al-Sharaq al-Awsat, September 27, 2014; al-Hayat, September 21, 2014). Although there is no evidence to show any formal agreement existed, it is plausible that IS and Turkey, their actions governed by pragmatism, saw a tacit understanding as mutually beneficial between 2014 and mid-2015.

Turkey represented a lifeline through which foreign fighters, goods and weapons entered and left Syria (Sasapost, December 6, 2015; al-Arabiya, September 20, 2015; YouTube, September 20, 2015). As long as Ankara ignored its smuggling activities, there was no reason for IS to establish a new frontline. The group’s priorities at that time were the consolidation of acquired territories and its experiments with local administrations in Iraq and Syria.

Pragmatism, likewise, influenced Turkey’s tacit acceptance of IS. For one, a war on IS might not have been a popular choice for the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, considering that only 10 percent of Turks polled in January 2016 considered IS as a terrorist organization (Masr al-Arabia, July 1, 2016). For another, Turkey would have risked IS retaliations. Turkish military action against

IS would likely have resulted in harm to the 48 Turkish hostages captured during an IS raid on the Turkish consulate in Mosul in June 2014 (Idaat, December 27, 2016; CNN Arabic, June 11, 2014). It would likely also have encouraged IS attacks on Turkish targets, impacting the local economy and the country’s tourism industry.

Al-Baghdadi understood that fear, stating that, “Turkey had been reluctant to go into direct fights [with us] fearing that this might force the hands of the mujahedeen [holy warriors] to include it in their operations and fights” (al-Naba, Issue 53, November 3, 2016).

Resistance to Kurdish Nationalism

In the summer of 2015, however, a game-changing event took place. The Suruc bombing on July 20 of that year swayed Turkey in favor of joining the anti-IS coalition.

Suicide bomber Abdul Rahman Agaloz attacked a group of Kurdish activists in the Turkish town of Suruc as they gathered to discuss plans for rebuilding the Kurdish town of Kobani in Syria. The blast killed 32 people.

Turkish officials blamed IS for the attack, but Kurdish leaders insisted that the identity of perpetrator was irrelevant. What was important, they said, was that the bombing was proof of their claims the government did too little to protect them.

Two days later, on July 22, 2015, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), acting in revenge for the Suruc bombing, claimed responsibility for the killing of two Turkish officers in Sanliurfa (al-Jazeera Arabic, July 23, 2015; al-Sharq al-Arabi, July 21, 2015; al-Watan, July 23, 2015; YouTube, July 20, 2015). Turkey and IS, it seemed, shared a common enemy – the PKK.

Hostile relations between Turkey and the PKK date back to the mid-1980s when Kurdish leaders demanded an independent state. Erdogan’s government considers Kurdish nationalism a national security problem, one “more threatening to Turkey than Daesh [IS]” (al-Arabiya, August 22, 2016).

IS too has been locked in conflict with the Kurds who, with Western backing in the form of high-quality training and equipment, particularly from the United States, have been one of the most effective fighting forces on the

ground against the group. The overlapping, triangular IS-Turkey-Kurd relationship is complex, but IS fears the fighting tenacity of the Kurds – who present a serious challenge to IS ambitions in Syria – and like Turkey, harbors an ideological objection to them.

That objection is less about specifically Kurdish nationalism, but rather because nationalism itself is at odds with IS' ideology. Kurdish nationalism is prefaced on Kurdish identity, whereas IS pursues an existence in which an Islamic identity outstrips all other identities whether personal, social or otherwise. Put differently, IS Islamism and Kurdish nationalism are inherently opposed to one another, and IS straightforwardly rejects the modern concept of the nation state in favor of a more "universal" form of government in the form of the caliphate.

In one publication, IS explains its stance on Kurdish nationalism:

"The Kurds found in collaborating with the crusaders against the Islamic State a tool to establish their nationalist state. If Kurds read history well, they will know that even if the crusaders mean well and grant them a state, the Islamic State war against them shall not stop until they go back to God and distance themselves from nationalism" (al-Naba, Issue 19, February 23, 2016).

Between July 2015 and January 2017, IS claimed responsibility for, or is suspected of conducting, at least 60 attacks on Kurdish targets in Syria and Turkey, resulting in casualties that reach into the thousands.

Looking Ahead

IS does not have the resources to pose a serious threat to Turkey, but in a sustained conflict the group will be able to sap Turkey's financial and other resources, and badly impact Turkey's tourism industry.

IS thrives on domestic discord, and by far the most immediate impact of its conflict with Turkey has been on Turkey's already tense relations with the Kurds.

Those strained relations are nothing new, but they have intensified because of Turkey's unwillingness to prevent what was effectively a campaign of ethnic-cleansing by IS against Syrian Kurds in Kobani in late 2014. This fomented Kurdish popular protests in Turkey in which demonstrators raised the picture of jailed Kurdish leader

Abdullah Ocalan, and on occasions violently clashed with local security forces (al-Binaa, November 03, 2014; al-Araby al-Jadeed, November 01, 2014; BBC Arabic, October 9, 2014).

If IS succeeds in carrying out further attacks against the Kurds, these will again be blamed on the government for failing to protect a part of its population. Such attacks will increase polarization in Turkish society, which, as part of a vicious cycle, IS can then further exploit.

Turkey must be wary that a continued conflict could cause some citizens to look elsewhere for protection or empowerment. If IS succeeds in creating large enough jihadist safe havens in Turkey — there are already enclaves in the cities of Istanbul, Antalya and Gaziantep — there will be serious consequences for Turkey, and to Western countries that offer visa-free entry to Turkish citizens.

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