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MALI: AL-QAEDA ALLIANCE A WARNING TO ISLAMIC STATE

Alexander Sehmer

An attack on a Malian military base in Boulikessi that left 11 soldiers dead has been claimed by the newly formed jihadist alliance Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, led by the Ansar Dine chief Iyad Ag Ghali. Although initial reports attributed the March 5 attack to Ansarul Islam, Ghali's group later claimed responsibility in a statement to the Mauritanian Nouakchott News Agency (MaliJet, March 10; RFI, March 10).

The attack came just days after the formation of the new group, which brings together some of Mali's main jihadist players under the al-Qaeda umbrella and boosts the groups local standing relative to jihadist rival Islamic State (IS).

Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, or "Support for Islam and Muslims", is an alliance between Ghali's Ansar Dine with al-Mourabitoun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) Sahara division (AfricaNews, March 3). Also part of the new alliance is Amadou Koufa, the founder of the Macina Liberation Front.

Koufa appeared alongside Ghali and AQIM officials, including Yahya Abu al-Hammam, in a video on March 2 pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri and announcing the merger (Jeune Afrique, March 2). Although a long-time acquaintance of Ghali, having fought with him in Timbuktu in 2012, Koufa appeared to have fallen out with the Ansar Dine leader last year and was reportedly toying with the idea of joining IS (Maliweb, January 5).

Clearly he has since been tempted back to the al-Qaeda fold. That may have something to do with putting Ghali, a Tuareg militant who has for years battled the Malian government, in overall charge. In doing so, al-Qaeda has brought its factions together under a local leader, highlighting an operational difference with IS, which frequently favors placing foreigners in leadership roles.

As well as their personal ties, Ghali's leadership was likely a draw for Koufa, whose own group is a Fulani jihadist movement that is as concerned with defending Fulani herding communities as it is with the spread of sharia.

The new alliance does little to simplify the fractured landscape of non-state actors in Mali (see Terrorism Monitor, January 27). However, it does help consolidate al-Qaeda's influence in the region. Ghali, who founded the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in the 1980s, has a certain political legitimacy as well as appeal to Tuareg groups outside Mali.

There was already coordination between the groups, but the alliance is also something of a warning from al-Qaeda to IS that the group intends to keep the Sahel firmly within its zone of influence.

YEMEN: TWO YEARS OF CONFLICT LEAVES AQAP STRONGER

Alexander Sehmer

Fighters with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have staged a series of attacks on United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed forces in Yemen's south, just days after a sustained U.S. aerial bombardment. The attacks highlight the continued resilience of AQAP amid a Saudi-led campaign to roll back Houthi advances and reinstate the government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi that is now more than two years old. The campaign has failed to reduce the perceived Houthi threat to Saudi Arabia and has instead strengthened AQAP.

The group's recent attacks targeted the Hadrami Elite Forces, a pro-government force open only to local Hadrami fighters. According to reports on social media, the group fired grad rockets at a checkpoint in al-Ghabar district on March 10 and attacked a camp in al-Dhilaah on March 15.

These were the first attacks in the wake of a five-day campaign of U.S. airstrikes against AQAP targets in Abyan, al-Baida and Shabwa provinces (Gulf Today, March 7). AQAP leader Saad Atif was thought to be present in Shabwa at the time of the bombing raids (Yemen Times, March 3). Meanwhile, another AQAP leader, Qasim Khalil, and former Guantanamo Bay detainee Yasir al-Silmi were among those killed (Asharq al-Awsat, March 10).

Despite the air raids, AQAP is little diminished in Yemen; instead, the country's ongoing conflict has served to strengthen it. The group's resources — bolstered by its capture of al-Mukalla in April 2015 — and its greater willingness to engage with the local population, has put it far ahead of rival jihadists Islamic State in Yemen (as Michael Horton explores in this issue of Terrorism Monitor, March 24).

Following its attacks on the Hadrami Elite Forces, AQAP played on that local goodwill in a statement on Telegram on March 16, stating "the sons of the honorable Hadramiyah tribes are not our adversaries nor are they our targets," and calling on Hadramawt tribes to withdraw support for UAE-backed forces (March 17, SITE).

The UAE along with anti-Houthi militias seized control of the Yemeni port of Aden from Houthi fighters in mid-2015 (al-Jazeera, July 23, 2015). That has been one of the few clear successes of the Saudi-led coalition's operations in Yemen. There have been few others since. Instead, aid organizations warn of a massive humanitarian crisis, with 60 percent of Yemen's population facing food insecurity (New Arab, 23 March). With Hodeida, Yemen's largest commercial port, under a Saudi-led blockade and the Saudi closure of Sanaa airport also hampering relief efforts, the situation is unlikely to change.

Instead the conflict is rumbling on, with AQAP proving to be the main beneficiary.

Why Islamic State Has Failed to Expand in Yemen

Michael Horton

Conditions in Yemen appear to be ideal for the expansion of an insurgent organization like Islamic State (IS). All the normal vectors for the spread of the virus of militant Salafism are present: grinding poverty; rampant youth unemployment; a weak and most often non-existent government; and thriving dark networks that traffic in everything from weapons to people. The Saudi-led and U.S.-backed war has exacerbated all of these and made what was already fertile ground for militant Salafism far more conducive to its growth.

So why has IS failed to gain a significant foothold in Yemen? First and foremost, it is competing with what is al-Qaeda's most agile and adaptive franchise — al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Second, the uncompromising and extreme interpretation of Islam that the IS leadership embraces is largely alien to the vast majority of Yemenis. Even those Yemenis whose views fall toward the radical end of the spectrum are unlikely to support the bloody tactics employed by IS. Third, the group's top-down authoritarian approach to leadership and governance is an anathema to much of Yemeni society, which values collaborative leadership and a respect for traditional forms of governance.

AQAP vs Islamic State

The existence of IS in Yemen dates to the fall of 2014 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi acknowledged that fighters in Yemen had pledged *baya* (a formal oath of allegiance) to him. At the time, IS was rapidly expanding across Iraq and Syria and was at the height of its popularity among militant Salafists. At the same time, AQAP was under intense pressure from Houthi and Yemeni Army forces. Beginning in November 2014, a number of mid-level AQAP operatives defected to IS in Yemen (al-Monitor, November 30, 2015). In March 2015, IS carried out its first attacks in Yemen by targeting two mosques in the capital of Sanaa (al-Jazeera, March 21, 2105). It justified the bombings by stating that the mosques were Zaydi Shia mosques used by the Houthis. In fact, the mosques — as with the vast majority of mosques in Yemen — were used by both Zaiydis and Shafi Sunnis.

The attack on the mosques was an attempt by IS to exacerbate sectarian tensions in Yemen, a tried and tested strategy that it used with considerable success in Syria and Iraq. However, in Yemen, the strategy has not worked nearly so well. This is because sectarian tensions between Zaydi Shia — a branch of Shia Islam that is closer to Sunni Islam than the Twelver Shia that predominate in Iran — and Shafi Sunnis have been exaggerated. Rather than enabling IS in Yemen to gain more recruits and support, the attacks cost it much of the limited support it had within Yemen's community of militant Salafists.

In 2015, IS enjoyed some success in Yemen's Hadramawt governorate, where it engaged in several battles with AQAP. However, the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which began on March 26, 2015, put pressure on the Houthis and allowed AQAP to go on the offensive across southern Yemen. AQAP captured the Yemeni port city of al-Mukalla in April 2015, where it seized large sums of money and vast stores of weapons (Yemen Times, April 6, 2015). From this point forward, AQAP was resurgent and IS, which had only just begun to gain a foothold in Yemen, was on the defensive.

During 2015 and 2016, IS continued to launch attacks on primarily civilian targets in urban environments, including its two most recent and most deadly attacks on retired and active duty Yemeni soldiers waiting to collect pensions and salaries in Aden. AQAP condemned the attacks, which collectively killed more than 100 people, and criticized IS' excessive use of violence (al-Arabiya, December 18, 2016).

AQAP's criticism is notable because it shows the group has learned to moderate its own behavior and realizes that such violence will undermine IS in Yemen. AQAP, more than many of the other al-Qaeda franchises, is extremely agile and continually demonstrates a willingness to learn from its mistakes. In 2013, AQAP apologized to the Yemeni people for its own attack on a military hospital in Sanaa in which 52 people were killed (al-Jazeera, December 22, 2013). Since then, AQAP has been more strategic about the targets it attacks.

Stirring up Local Tensions

In addition to being mindful of public opinion when selecting targets, AQAP has learned that its survival is contingent on gaining the support — or at least avoiding angering — of the tribal communities that live in AQAP's areas of operation. To this end, AQAP has modified its approach and has mostly tempered its radicalism by adopting what can be called a gradualist policy. This policy means that AQAP works to gradually and carefully impose its will on those communities that it wants to govern.

In 2012, AQAP suffered one of its most severe defeats at the hands of tribesmen in Shabwa and Abyan. It had tried to impose its hardline understanding of Islamic law and to usurp the authority of the area's tribal leadership. In response, the tribesmen formed militias and, with the help of the Yemeni Army and careful U.S. support, forced AQAP to flee the area.

IS' even more extreme interpretation of Islam, and the indiscriminate violence that such an interpretation justifies, means that IS will find little lasting support in Yemen. Unlike AQAP, it is unlikely that IS will moderate its ideology or tactics. To do so would be to lose much of its raison d'etre. IS in Yemen's primary critique of AQAP is that the organization is too moderate and not "Islamic" enough.

It is also unlikely that IS in Yemen will adopt a more collaborative approach to governance. Its ideology and its small size in Yemen both militate against such a shift. The group will not do as AQAP has learned to do and work within existing structures of tribal governance. Its insistence on recreating an imagined caliphate does not allow for compromise. The extreme nature of IS' views limit its viability within Yemen where top-down authority is neither traditional nor acceptable to most.

Additionally, IS continues to use a number of foreigners as operatives which, as AQAP discovered, is problematic in Yemen. Yemenis are loathe to submit to the authority of non-Yemenis, much less the Somalis that IS in Yemen favors.

It has taken years for AQAP to learn how to effectively operate in a Yemeni context — or rather *contexts*, since Yemen's socio-cultural environments are highly variable. In addition to years of experience in Yemen and a tradition of learning and adapting, AQAP is now better funded and better armed than it has ever been.

Bringing an End to IS in Yemen

AQAP has effectively and efficiently used its windfall from the war in Yemen to grow its organization and refine its capabilities. One part of its organization that AQAP has focused on expanding is its intelligence wing. In this respect, AQAP has learned a great deal from its fellow al-Qaeda affiliate, the Somalia based al-Shabaab.

Early on in its development, al-Shabaab focused on creating a formidable intelligence apparatus, the Aminyat, which has helped the group manage its relations, often violently, with Somalia's fractious clans. It has also helped al-Shabaab penetrate and largely neutralize the IS in Somalia.

IS in Yemen is a small but porous organization that does not possess the kind of skilled operatives that AQAP does. It is likely that AQAP's own intelligence wing has thoroughly penetrated the group.

IS in Yemen's future is far from certain. As IS in Iraq and Syria comes under increasing pressure, there will be more harm done to the already damaged Islamic State brand. The very tactics — extreme violence, top-down authority and a focus on exacerbating sectarian tensions — that allowed IS to expand in Iraq and Syria will limit its expansion in Yemen.

In all likelihood, much of IS in Yemen's organization will eventually either be co-opted or eliminated by AQAP.

Michael Horton is a senior analyst for Arabian affairs at the Jamestown Foundation. He is a frequent contributor to Jane's Intelligence Review and has written for numerous other publications including: The National Interest, The Economist and West Point's CTC Sentinel.

Afghan Forces' Unexpected Win: The Killing of Qari Saifullah Akhter

Farhan Zahid

The death in a clash with Afghan forces of long-time Pakistani jihadist Qari Saifullah Akhter, the emir of Pakistan's Harkat ul Jihad e Islami, is both a surprising victory for Afghanistan's security forces and an indication of the Taliban leadership's recent attempts to rebuild frayed links with al-Qaeda amid Afghanistan's on-going conflict.

Akhter, 58 and widely respected in the jihadist circles of Pakistan and Afghanistan as a veteran of 40-years of jihad, was killed by Afghan security forces in the Birmil district of Paktika province in January (Newsline, February 20). He was reportedly fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban, apparently having recently relocated to the country.

As well as a setback for the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups, his death in rural Afghanistan comes as something of a surprise since, according to earlier reports, he had been enjoying a comfortable retirement in Pakistan, where he ran a madrasa near Islamabad. [1]

Veteran of Jihad

Akhter began his jihadist career at a time when few Pakistanis, even Pakistani Islamists, were considering armed conflict. He was a graduate of the notorious Jamaia Uloom ul Islamia madrasa in Binori Town, Karachi and a protégé of Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, the madrasas' principal and considered the "godfather" of Pakistani jihadists. At the time, jihadist movements in Pakistan required Shamzai's blessings to launch their *tanzeemat* (organizations). Even Mullah Omar, the Afghan Taliban's supreme leader, is believed to have considered Shamzai as a mentor.

Akhter was a pioneer of jihadist organizations in Pakistan. In 1981, he and two other students from the madrasa — Fazal ur Rehman Khalil and Irshad Ahmad — founded Harkat ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI), an Islamist jihadi movement with roots in Pakistani Deobandi sects. Khalil

would later split with Akhter, establishing Harkat ul Mujahedeen, a splinter group of HuJI, and go on to become a co-signatory with al-Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden on a fatwa against "Jews and Crusaders" in 1998.

In the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, HuJI had the blessing of Shamzai, along with seed money provided by Islamist charity organizations then working to promote Afghan jihad in Pakistan. Today it has the distinction of being the only Islamist terrorist organization of Pakistani origins to have operations in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. [2]

Akhter, in collusion with rogue Islamist military officers, was even part of the failed Islamist coup, known as Operation Khilafat, aimed at toppling the government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 1995. [3]

Regional Network

Apart from his strong jihadist credentials in Pakistan, Akhter was one of only a small number of militants to develop an early rapport with the Afghan Taliban. During the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan, between 1996 and 2001, he became an advisor to Mullah Omar and served as a judge in Kabul. His HuJI organization even supplemented Afghan Taliban forces with a contingent of Pakistani foot soldiers to aid the group's conquest of northern Afghanistan.

Akhter used his Taliban influence to help develop al-Qaeda-Taliban relations. When al-Qaeda provided fighters from its non-Afghan Brigade 055 to aid Taliban forces in fighting against Northern Alliance forces, it was on Akhter's advice.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the HuJI leader was seen fleeing with Mullah Omar on his motorcycle in the suburb of Kandahar. [4] Despite reports he was killed fleeing Afghanistan, he later resurfaced in Pakistan but remained aloof from public gatherings and talks.

Return to Afghanistan

Akhter's recent reemergence in Afghanistan, fighting alongside Taliban forces, provoked some excitement in the jihadist world, as well as confusion among the authorities. According to an Afghan government statement, Akhter was overseeing a "terrorist hub" in the Bagram and Reshkor regions of Kabul province. It is likely the Taliban hoped to use his influence to build alliances and boost morale ahead of the upcoming spring fighting season.

Afghan officials created confusion and generated further speculations about Akhter's presence in Afghanistan because they first announced his death in a clash with Afghan military in Birmil district of Paktika province, but five weeks later claimed he was killed in a raid in Nawa district of Ghazni province (Nation, January 10; Geo News, January 10).

Since Akhter served as a go-between for al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban while Afghanistan was under Taliban rule, it is possible he was in the country to reconcile the two Islamist militant forces as part of a broader strategy before the start of spring and the beginning of a new fighting season. The recent divisions in the Afghan Taliban, following the death of former leader Mullah Mansoor Akhter in 2016, could have prompted the group to call on him. Afghanistan's Taliban-led insurgency is not monolithic and its leadership's promises that the Afghan government will soon fall increasingly appear overblown to its supporters. It may be the Taliban hoped to capitalize on Akhter's veteran status since — at the age of 58, it is unlikely he was there to fight.

Akhter may have hoped that the emergence of Islamic State's Khurasan chapter in Afghanistan, which has been unsettling for both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, could improve ties damaged in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and more tightly knit the two together.

The development also comes amid a recent shift in Afghan politics that has seen a peace agreement between the government and the veteran Hizb-e-Islami militia leader Gulbaden Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar's move to join the political establishment was a blow to the Taliban. Bringing in Akhter was perhaps a move by the Taliban to show the group can still claim broad support from the jihadist community.

Taliban Leadership Divided

Afghanistan is likely to see an increase in violence as the spring fighting season begins, with the 2017 fighting season set to test the Afghan government and security forces. In that context, Akhter and his HuJI could have been a boon to the Taliban and his death may prove

something of a pre-emptive victory of Afghan security forces, albeit an unexpected one.

Akhter was a seasoned jihadist who had fought against the Soviets in the 1980s. His return from retirement to the war zone of Afghanistan appears to be a dramatic development and is perhaps indicative of attempts by the Afghan Taliban's leadership to rebuild and strengthen damaged links with al-Qaeda.

That in itself could be a desperate move, given divisions within the group's leadership. If so, the Afghan government should act quickly and seize the opportunity to break the back of the Islamist insurgency.

Farhan Zahid writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamic State, jihadi ideologues and the Afghan Taliban.

NOTES

[1] Author interview with Azaz Syed, Islamabad-based senior journalist (February 18, 2017)

[2] Further information on the group can be found on the South Asia Terrorism portal (here); see also Asia Times Online (December 10, 2004)

[3] Benazir Bhutto makes reference to this in her book *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West*, Simon and Schuster (New York: 2008)

[4] Carlotta Gall, The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan 2001-2014, Penguin Publishers (London: 2014)

Institutionalized 'Warlordism': Syria's National Defense Force

Chris Zambelis

As Syria's civil war enters its sixth year, the balance of the conflict has tilted toward Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Baathist regime. Bolstered by its international and regional allies, the regime is touting numerous territorial gains — including the reassertion of its authority over eastern Aleppo in December 2016 — as a sign of its resurgence, in contrast to the armed opposition's dwindling prospects.

The strategic implications of the regime's return to eastern Aleppo are profound. It consolidates its presence in Syria's most populous city, a pre-war economic and industrial hub. It also reinforces the regime's control over Syria's five largest population centers — Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, Hama and Latakia — solidifying its position in a large expanse of territory across central and western Syria, from where it draws most of its support (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], December 23, 2016; Syrian Arab News Agency [Damascus], December 22, 2016).

Russia, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraq have also provided vital support to the Syrian government, including coordinating with Syrian forces during their military offensive to recapture eastern Aleppo, and fighting alongside Syrian forces on other fronts. Iran and Iraq in particular have helped to facilitate an influx of Shia militias to strengthen Baathist forces on the ground.

In contrast, the contribution of loyalist Syrian militias in ensuring regime survival has been treated as an afterthought. In this context, the role of the multitude of irregular militias that operate under the auspices of the *Quwat al-Difaa al-Watani* (National Defense Force, NDF) in helping to preserve the Baathist regime merits consideration. In light of ongoing diplomacy to bring about a ceasefire, the present and future role of the NDF and other heavily armed and battle-hardened loyalist paramilitaries will become increasingly relevant to the debate over Syria's future (al-Jazeera [Doha] February 15).

Rise of the Militias

A wave of defections among the conscription-based Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the security services in the days that followed the spring 2011 uprising — compounded in later years by losses sustained over six years of heavy fighting and a dwindling conscript pool of military-age males — provoked a shift in the regime's counterinsurgency strategy.

The regime organized local militias, known as *al-Lijaan al-Shabiyya* (Popular Committees), along with other irregular formations with the intention of augmenting the ranks of the SAA and other security forces. These would protect areas that were viewed as loyalist or otherwise neutral during the conflict. Generally equipped with light arms and two-way radios, they organized checkpoints and provided an overt security presence (*Terrorism Monitor*, May 2, 2013; al-Mayadeen [Beirut], October 28, 2012; SyriaNews.info [Damascus], October 23, 2012; *al-Akhbar*, October 23, 2012).

The NDF, established in 2012, represented the regime's attempt to more formally unify these disparate Popular Committees. It has since evolved into a crucial auxiliary force, alongside the regular conscription-based SAA and other armed bodies (Day Press [Damascus], January 18, 2013; YouTube, January 9, 2013).

The NDF has figured prominently in a wide array of military operations across Syria. Its detractors frequently associate it with the loyalist *shabiha* (ghosts) criminal gangs deployed by the regime during the earliest days of the uprising to confront opposition demonstrators. Despite its significant Sunni Arab contingent, represented in both its command and rank-and-file, the NDF is also often described as a sectarian militia dominated by Alawites and other Syrian minorities (al-Monitor, March 14, 2014; *al-Riyadh* [Riyadh], April 22, 2013).

External Influence

The NDF is often compared to Iran's Basij (Mobilization) militia, a claim repeated by Iranian officials (akhbaralaan.net [Dubai], August 8, 2015; Dezful Emrooz [Dezful], March 2, 2015). Indeed, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) is cited as having been instrumental in the Baathist regime's decision to raise loyalist militias.

Iran has provided the NDF with critical training and operational support. However, while elements of unconventional warfare — including military advisory and training, counterinsurgency and foreign internal defense operations — are central to its mission, claims that the IRGC-QF essentially controls the NDF without regard for Damascus are overstated (al-Monitor, November 20, 2015). Lebanon's Hezbollah is also sometimes credited as being behind the NDF.

Notwithstanding the roles the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah played in strengthening the NDF, the Syrian regime's decision to raise and deploy loyalist militias drawn from the civilian population is not unprecedented. During Syria's 1976-1982 Muslim Brotherhood-led insurrection, the government organized a host of civilian-led militias from among Baath Party loyalists and other civilian cadres. The resort to state-organized militias by embattled governments is a common feature of civil wars and insurgencies.

The NDF and the turn toward "militiafication" represents the regime's efforts to transform the command and organizational structures of its military in response to the corruption, disunity and indiscipline associated with the SAA (Syrian Observer, February 17). The formation in 2013 of elite units attached to the SAA, such as the Tiger Forces and Desert Hawks, is likewise emblematic of the government's goal of reorganizing its military structures (al-Masdar News [United Arab Emirates], June 4, 2016).

The establishment of the Fourth Assault Corps in October 2015, followed by the Fifth Assault Corps in November 2016, has been described as an attempt to introduce into the military attributes of the NDF — particularly its volunteer-driven nature in contrast to the conscription-based structures typical of the SAA. They are also seen as a way to incorporate Russian and Iranian irregular warfare doctrine into Syrian military practice (Syria Deeply, January 7; al-Jazeera, November 30, 2016).

Additionally, they may also reflect plans to further disaggregate Syria's military power to better insulate Assad from a potential coup directed from the armed forces, a longstanding fear of authoritarian regimes and, in particular, the Baathist hierarchy surrounding Assad.

Some reports have suggested that the NDF will be disbanded and integrated into the Fourth Assault Corps (*al-Hayat* [London], October 11, 2015). The formation of the Local Defense Force, an Aleppo-based umbrella of loyalist militias, along with the Baath Brigades, Popular Army and a host of other factions — including Palestinian-led militias organized in Palestinian refugee camps — further illustrates the regime's reliance on paramilitary detachments (Enab Baladi [Darayya], Feburary 21; Etana [Damascus], 2014; al-Monitor, November 20, 2013).

Encouraging Local Support

The NDF's utility to the regime exceeds beyond the military. It serves as a vehicle for mobilizing the population to ensure loyalty and cultivate support among vulnerable communities caught between competing opposition currents. The NDF provides the regime with a means through which to project its influence in areas where its presence and legitimacy have been undermined or eliminated. In military terms, the NDF acts as a firewall against territorial advances by the armed opposition.

The reliance on locally-recruited cadres also strengthens the regime's intelligence and overall situational awareness about developments on the ground. In this regard, the employment of the NDF and other loyalist Syrian militias is reminiscent of doctrinal counterinsurgency campaigns.

In organizational and operational terms, the NDF has been integrated into the Syrian security apparatus. This is the case even as NDF elements appear to have retained much of their independence and flexibility, a notable development given the regime's highly-centralized and despotic nature.

Equally important, the localized NDF may prove an attractive alternative for disaffected insurgents. For example, the NDF is being positioned as a crucial element of the regime's efforts to entice members of the armed opposition to lay down their arms and rejoin the fold (*al-Hayat*, February 16; Syrian Arab News Agency, January 9). The regime has reportedly offered armed opposition factions the option of remaining mobilized, albeit under NDF auspices, in areas where they hold sway as part of its broader of amnesty (Zaman al-Wasl [Qamishli], December 10, 2016).

The regime has employed the NDF and other militia formations to reconcile with or otherwise co-opt Sunni Arab tribes fighting on behalf of the regime against the so-called Islamic State (IS) and other armed opposition forces. As the conflict progresses, the NDF is likely to remain central to Assad's objective of returning all of Syria to government control (Syrian Arab News Agency, January 9).

Cadres and Operations

The NDF is estimated to be composed of between 90,000 to 100,000 members, although a precise assessment of its membership is difficult to gauge (*al-Yaum* [Dammam], September 25, 2015). Like its Popular Committees predecessor, the NDF has often been associated with Syria's religious and ethnic minority communities — including the Alawites, Christians, Druze and Armenians — in contrast to the regular Syrian army and other conventional force structures, which draw most of their rank and file from Syria's majority Sunni Arab population.

While an accurate estimate of its demographic composition is difficult to ascertain, labeling the NDF a sectarian organization would be inaccurate. The generally localized characteristics of its recruitment base suggest that NDF detachments organized on the neighborhood, village, town, city and provincial levels will tend to reflect the demographic composition of their surroundings. For example, NDF formations in locations populated mostly by Sunni, Druze or Christians will likely reflect their respective Sunni, Druze or Christian constituencies. Similarly, NDF formations based in areas that are diverse in terms of their religious and ethnic makeup will likewise reflect these peculiarities.

By contrast, the armed opposition is essentially a Sunni Arab-dominated enterprise. At the same time, however, Sunni Arabs, particularly urban dwellers and members of the middle and merchant classes, constitute a critical part of the regime's support base. Influential Sunni clans, including the notorious Berri clan, which is implicated in organized crime and a host of abuses in Aleppo on behalf of the regime, are also well represented in the NDF (Orient News [Dubai], July 27, 2013). Sunnis who may be motivated by fear of the armed opposition (as opposed to partisan loyalty to Assad) are also reflected in the NDF. The NDF's diversity is revealed in its inclusion of

women, who even take active security and combat roles (Press TV [Tehran], November 2013).

The NDF offers prospective recruits numerous advantages. Membership offers a steady salary, substantially higher than that earned by SAA conscripts. It is a welcome prospect considering the absence of viable employment opportunities. NDF recruits are also lured by assurances they will be deployed near or around their homes on a part-time basis, as opposed to extended deployments in distant fronts, while the opportunities to participate in more complex operations yield the potential for higher salaries.

NDF recruits are also enticed by the prospect of having their military conscription requirements satisfied in what is widely viewed as a more favorable scenario. Indeed, many SAA members abandoned their posts in favor of joining the NDF (*al-Yaum* September 25, 2015; Syria Deeply, June 25, 2015).

NDF members undergo both basic and specialized military training and are provided with uniforms and weapons (al-Manar [Beirut], February 4, 2013). The organizational dynamic between the NDF and the SAA and other regular armed bodies is hard to determine. Some accounts report that the NDF operates under SAA orders, receiving intelligence and other tactical and operational guidance. In other instances, Hezbollah and Iranian factions may train and command particular NDF cadres (*al-Hayat*, January 9; The Wall Will Fall, September 16, 2015).

Abuse Claims

While the NDF is portrayed as a vehicle of national service, a message that resonates with many Syrians, it also encompasses a patron-client relationship with the regime, a relationship that the regime actively encourages. This dynamic can be seen in its links to loyalist businessmen, a number of whom have been accused of organizing, financing and even leading NDF detachments. One such is Sami Aubrey.

An Aleppo-based businessman who, among other things, owned a chain of amusement parks, Aubrey commands the NDF's Aleppo contingent. He is accused of utilizing the NDF and other militias to protect and expand his own business interests and perpetrate other abuses. Members of Aubrey's extended family, such as the local construction magnate Muhammed Jammoul, have also been accused of abuses in Aleppo (eqtsad.net, May 4, 2016; Alsouria.net [Syria] May 1, 2016; Arabi21.com [London], March 1, 2016).

The NDF has likewise attracted a sizeable criminal component that is exploiting the conflict for purposes of personal gain, while many NDF detachments serve as hired guns for criminal enterprises that are thriving amid the chaos of war.

Baathist and sympathetic information outlets, including traditional and social media platforms, extol the NDF's performance on the battlefield alongside the SAA, Hezbollah and other Syrian armed units such as the Tiger Forces and Desert Hawks. Doing so elevates the NDF's profile and legitimacy. NDF casualties are likewise eulogized as heroes and martyrs alongside other regular forces in official announcements.

The NDF boasts an extensive presence online, operating multiple official websites as well as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter accounts that are frequently updated with timely reports from various battlefronts and political news. Localized NDF formations often operate their own social media platforms, such as those operated by NDF forces in Aleppo, Baniyas, Homs, Hama and Hasaka.

The NDF's official Telegram instant messaging application allows users to contact the organization securely and at one point the NDF even boasted its own cyberwarfare and hacker collective modelled after the Syrian Electronic Army.

Post-Conflict Prospects

While the Baathist regime struggles to portray an image of unity between the NDF and other security structures, the reality on the ground presents a far more complex picture. Clashes between NDF detachments and the regular Syrian security forces are a regular occurrence (Alsouria.net, January 4, 2016; Deirezzor24 [Syria], December 24, 2016; Syria Direct, April 30, 2015). Tensions between the NDF and Lebanese Hezbollah have also resulted in internecine fighting between allies (al-Jazeera, January 25, 2015).

As is often typical of the behavior of irregular detachments in civil wars, localized militias operating under NDF auspices have been implicated in abuses including

trafficking, extortion, armed robbery, murder, looting and abductions-for-ransom (Democratic Republic Studies Center [Paris], September 2015).

Militias operating under NDF auspices have clashed with each other in what amount to battles over turf and war spoils, while NDF militia commanders have carved out lucrative fiefdoms in the neighborhoods and towns where they hold sway. The government has largely turned a blind eye to these activities, in exchange for continued loyalty, but in doing so has entrenched a climate of warlordism that will be difficult to rein in following any potential peace agreement (al-Monitor, August 24, 2015).

Foreign actors such as the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah will likely act to preserve their influence in any post-conflict scenario — Iran has already called for the implementation of a peace accord modeled after Lebanon's Taif Agreement that would, among other things, legitimize existing militias (al-Hayat, August 24, 2015).

The NDF has become central to Assad's survival strategy, but while it officially operates under the regime's control, its localized character has created new centers of authority and local powerbrokers. These are unlikely to easily relinquish their influence when the conflict is finally over and will present a serious challenge for any post-conflict demilitarization, demobilization and reintegration programs.

Chris Zambelis is a senior analyst with Helios Global, Inc, a risk management group based in the Washington DC area. He specializes in Middle East Affairs.