

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XV, ISSUE 11

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INDONESIA: EYES ON THE ISLAMISTS

Alexander Sehmer

The Indonesian military has said it is beefing up defenses in parts of the country in anticipation of an expansion of Islamic State (IS) activities. That has included stepping up security in Ambon, Maluku and North Sulawesi, which lie south of the Philippines, in anticipation of terror attacks ([Jakarta Post](#), May 31). The move has been prompted by events in the Philippines, where President Rodrigo Duterte has declared martial law in the southern island of Mindanao in order to tackle a relatively small number of IS-linked militants.

It also comes after five people were killed and 10 others injured in two suicide blasts at a bus station in Kampung Melayu, in East Jakarta on May 24 ([Jakarta Globe](#), May 25). The blasts hit a parade welcoming the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, but three of the five killed were police officers. It was the most deadly attack to hit the capital since January last year when four people were killed and 25 wounded in an attack by gunmen and a suicide bomber (see [Hot Issue](#), January 27, 2016). That attack was attributed to Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), a collection of Indonesian militant groups that

have sworn allegiance to IS. Police believe the bus station attack could be linked to the same network ([Jakarta Post](#), May 25).

In the wake of the bus station attack, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, Indonesia's president, has hinted that the long-promised revision of the country's 2003 terrorism law could give the military a greater role in tackling terrorism ([Jakarta Post](#), May 30). Military officials have received this suggestion relatively enthusiastically ([Kompas](#), May 30). But it is hotly debated by liberals skeptical of giving the army greater powers and fearful of the potential fallout from a heavy-handed response to the problem.

Meanwhile, there are political concerns over the growing influence of Islamists. On May 8, the government moved to ban the Indonesian chapter of Hizbut Tahrir, accusing it of acting against state values, or rather Indonesia's foundational ideology of "Pancasila" ([Jakarta Post](#), May 8). President Jokowi has since threatened to close down more organizations, and while he declined to name those that would be affected, they are likely to be Islamist ([Tempo](#), May 31).

Hizbut Tahrir leaders were some of the loudest voices among a coalition of Islamists calling for the prosecution

of Jakarta's Christian former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, on blasphemy charges.

Last month, Ahok, an ally of President Jokowi, was jailed for two years ([Jakarta Post](#), May 9). The sentence was condemned by international rights groups, but it highlights a trend over the last few years of growing religious intolerance in Indonesia. That is an area where greater military deployment cannot be effective, but one that needs to be addressed with similar drive if Islamist militancy is to be tackled.

MALDIVES: SAUDI INFLUENCE AND RISING INTOLERANCE

Alexander Sehmer

The Maldivian blogger Yameen Rasheed was brutally stabbed and killed on April 23, the third prominent media figure to be targeted in the Maldives in recent years. While the murder comes against the backdrop of political turmoil, it may also highlight a growing strain of Islamist extremism in the country.

Rasheed was attacked as he was walking home from work. Police found him in the stairwell of his apartment building in the Maldivian capital of Malé with multiple wounds to his chest and neck ([Maldives Independent](#), April 23). He later died in hospital.

The 29-year-old was well known for his blog "The Daily Panic," in which he was both amusing and frequently critical of the Maldivian government and Islamist extremism. As a result of his writing, he received multiple death threats, which his family says he reported to the authorities on at least three separate occasions ([Raajje TV](#), May 3). They believe the police failed to protect him and want some form of international inquiry into his death, a call echoed by the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party.

What form such an investigation would take is unclear, but there is outside pressure on the Maldives to investigate Rasheed's murder. Zeid Raad al-Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights, framed the killing in the context of a clampdown by Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen on political opponents and government critics ([al-Jazeera](#), April 25). Islamist extremists are also in the picture.

The Maldives has witnessed an increase in extremism in recent years, both in terms of the number of Maldivian Islamists leaving to fight for jihadist causes abroad, as well as an increasing intolerance toward liberals at home. Local commentators blame this on the spread of Wahhabism — they stress it is a new phenomenon that runs contrary to the Sufi-inspired variety of Sunni Islam, which is more traditional to the Maldives ([Maldives Independent](#), April 24).

The growth of Wahhabism is attributed to the increasing influence of Saudi Arabia. The two countries have grown

closer under President Yameen. The Gulf Kingdom is a major investor in the Maldives, spending millions on infrastructure projects, but it also funds religious scholarships and a mosque-building program. During a visit to the Maldives last year, the speaker of Saudi Arabia's shura council, Abdulla bin Mohamed bin Ibrahim al-Sheikh, donated \$100,000 to the Islamic University of the Maldives ([Maldives Independent](#), January 5, 2016). Earlier this year, a rumored government plan to sell a Maldivian island to a member of the Saudi royal family provoked political uproar ([Maldives Independent](#), March 4).

For Saudi Arabia, the benefits of the relationship are diplomatic — the Maldives is counted among the members of the Kingdom's anti-terrorism coalition, and in May last year Malé cut ties with Iran, essentially at Riyadh's behest ([Maldives Independent](#), May 17, 2016). The impact on the Maldives is more mixed. While economically beneficial, on a social level the relationship may still prove to be problematic.

Russia a Fair-Weather Friend for Syria's Kurds

James Pothecary

In the kaleidoscopic, ever-shifting array of factions that characterize the Syrian civil war, allegiances can shift in surprising ways. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship between Russia and the Kurds.

In theory, the two sides should be diametrically opposed. Moscow is heavily invested in supporting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad's forces oppose the self-proclaimed Kurdish territory of Rojava, located in the northern governorates of al-Hasakh, Aleppo and Raqqqa (now renamed by the Kurds as the cantons of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani).

Yet in March 2017, reports surfaced that Russia was constructing a military facility in Rojava-controlled Afrin, technically part of the Aleppo governorate ([The New Arab](#), March 20). Russian military advisors are to provide training to Kurdish armed units, particularly in counter-terrorism. Russia played down the move, saying it had no plans for additional bases in Syria ([al-Jazeera](#), March 20). But Turkey remained unconvinced, its officials concerned that they had not at least been consulted ([Hürriyet Daily News](#), March 22).

Many analysts see the unlikely Kurdish alliance with Moscow as a result of the limited political objectives of the Kurds, who aim for self-governance and autonomy rather than regime-change in Damascus. However, this explanation is insufficient in itself. Kurdish forces have intermittently fought against government forces, and while Kurdish ambitions for Rojava are limited, they are still antithetical to the unitary state over which Assad believes he can still regain control.

It is more the case that combatting Rojava is not yet a high priority for the Syrian government. This permits Russia some room for maneuver when it comes to cooperating with the Kurds. For Russia, such cooperation fulfils two purposes: it maintains political pressure on Turkey, and therefore NATO, and it supports a co-belligerent against Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist non-state armed groups (NSAGs).

Kurdish Political Objectives

The modest political ambitions of the Kurds' self-proclaimed territory are crucial in "unlocking" Russian support for Rojava. While the initial July 2012 campaign by the People's Protection Units (YPG), effectively Rojava's armed forces, focused on expelling Syrian military and security units from the cities of Afrin and Kobani, fighting was restricted to minor skirmishes, with government forces choosing to withdraw rather than defend their positions ([Irin News](#), August 2, 2012). Further territorial gains by the YPG were concentrated in northern areas of the country with large Kurdish populations.

Notably, Rojava has not sought a military campaign striking deeper into Syrian government territory, choosing instead to solidify and defend its hard-won autonomous zone. A March 2016 declaration by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdish governing party of Rojava, described the territory as autonomous, rather than independent of Damascus. In fact, the document specifically rejected the full-scale division of Syria and made no call for Assad's removal. There has even been some limited tactical cooperation between the regime and the Kurds, for instance a joint operation against IS to defend the government-controlled city of Hasakah ([al Arabiya](#), July 20, 2015).

However, Syrian hostility toward Rojava should not be underestimated. Regime officials have rejected Kurdish proposals even for limited autonomy within a federal Syria ([Rudaw](#), February 24). Examples of on-the-ground tactical cooperation do not change the fact that the two factions are strategically opposed. Russia's security concerns, however, mean Moscow's viewpoint differs somewhat from that of Damascus on the issue.

Russian Concerns

It is difficult to overemphasize the threat Russian officials perceive IS as posing to Russia's own national security. Northern Syria is about 1,250 kilometers (km) from Russia's restive southern Chechnya region, which has its own Islamist insurgency. In March 2017, for example, IS claimed it was behind an attack on Russian military units in the area ([DW](#), March 25). There are at least 2,500 Russians fighting for IS and other Islamist groups in Syria, and an outmigration of these fighters back into Russian territory is a serious concern for the Russian security apparatus. Several terrorist attacks not only in the southern

regions of Russia, but also in the major western city of Saint Petersburg, have been attributed by the Russian security services to Islamist terror groups.

From Moscow's perspective, therefore, IS is a (if not *the*) primary security threat. Given the effectiveness of Kurdish armed units in tackling IS in Syria, it should be no surprise that Russia is willing to cooperate with Rojava in order to bolster the YPG's kinetic capability and personnel training levels.

Russian support also reflects Moscow's calculations as regards Turkey. On November 24, 2015, Turkish air-defense systems shot down a Russian fighter aircraft conducting operations in Syria. This dramatically worsened Russo-Turkish relations to the point where open conflict seemed a genuine possibility. Relations have since improved, predicated around shared counter-terrorism concerns, and are now almost fully normalized ([al-Monitor](#), March 13). Nonetheless, Turkey remains staunchly opposed to the Assad regime, and its seven-month-long Euphrates Shield operation, which officially came to an end in March, demonstrated that Ankara is willing and able to intervene directly in Syria to advance its own geopolitical interests (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), September 16, 2016).

To that end, it seems likely that Russian support for Rojava serves a secondary purpose — that of hampering Turkish military operations in northern Syria. Turkey sees no difference between the YPG and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), a Kurdish separatist insurgency that has been intermittently fighting Ankara since the 1980s. It is in Russia's interest to amplify the threat Turkey perceives Rojava to pose as much as possible, as it will divert the attention of the Turkish armed forces toward the Kurds and away from Assad's troops, or from participation in any potential upswing in anti-Russian NATO activities. Furthermore, the door remains open for a rapid escalation in Russian support for the YPG, should relations between Ankara and Moscow deteriorate or if Russia perceives Turkey to be encroaching on its strategic ambitions within Syria.

Moreover, Turkey remains a NATO member, and Russia's own 2016 national security strategy identifies the alliance as one of the primary threats to Russian national security ([Russian National Security Strategy](#), December 2015). Supporting a hostile actor on Turkey's southern flank, therefore, allows Moscow room to rapidly escalate

its aid for Rojava, dependent on the perceived threat from NATO.

The Road Ahead

Ultimately, Kurdish-Russian cooperation comes down to target prioritization by Moscow. In a conflict as complicated as that in Syria, strategic calculations are made not on the basis of ideological coherence or deep-rooted alliances, but by the threat-level each particular group poses to the other at any given moment.

Russia at present prioritizes combating IS and tying up the Turkish armed forces by promoting a semi-rogue Kurdish territory that poses little immediate threat to Assad's Syrian state and none whatsoever to Russia.

However, with the eventual military defeat of IS in Syria, or in the event of a de-escalation with NATO, Moscow's own priorities will shift and Rojava will likely find itself in the scope of the Russian military machine. Should IS' de facto capital of Raqqa fall to government forces, for instance, Russia is highly likely to withdraw its backing for Rojava, just as the Kurdish territory becomes a greater priority for Syrian forces.

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Learning and Adapting: al-Qaeda's Attempts to Counter Drone Strikes

Tobias J. Burgers & Scott N. Romaniuk

Over the past 15 years, the use of drones and drone strikes has become an integral part of U.S. counter-terrorism operations against overseas militant groups. The tactic has several clear benefits over larger, costlier and less discreet military operations employing conventional military aircraft.

As the use of armed drones continues, however, their targets — terrorists and terrorist organizations, particularly al-Qaeda — have grown accustomed to the threat. The increased deployment of Predators and Reapers, which militants often refer to as spy planes (الطائرات الجاسوسية), has played a direct role in changing the tactical and operational character of organizations like al-Qaeda. The constant threat of drone strikes had forced them to change their tactics from simply attempting to evade drone attacks to developing and employing active anti-drone measures.

Early Avoidance Efforts

Nearly a decade ago, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was already experimenting with simple camouflage measures to conceal their fighters from drone strikes. These efforts were collected and disseminated through instructional videos on avoidance methods, such as how to assemble an individual "body wrap" — a blanket used to absorb body heat, reducing an individual's infrared signature and as such making him more difficult for drones to target. These videos led to the creation of strategy guides that detailed procedures on how to evade drones, and later to guides on how best to defeat them.

The discovery in 2013 of counter-drone manuals in Timbuktu, Mali provided an insight into efforts by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), along with potentially other branches of the terror group, to adapt to the reality of drone usage. [1]

Journalists found the manuals, which detail 22 steps for evading drone attacks, in buildings abandoned by al-

Qaeda fighters in the wake of a successful push by French and Malian troops to retake the city from Islamists and anti-government forces. The guides appear to have been used for training rank and file militants in anti-drone operations and illustrate how al-Qaeda's strategies to evade drones have developed over time.

Early instructional efforts focused solely on camouflage and avoidance tactics, but this was a result of the failure of more ambitious efforts. In fact, prior to disseminating its guidance on camouflage, al-Qaeda had conducted unsuccessful research on how to jam the Global Positioning System (GPS) signals of Predators and Reapers as they passed overhead. [2]

Furthermore, al-Qaeda sought to understand how it could dupe the infrared chips used by drones to pinpoint the exact location for a strike. For all these efforts, however, the group lacked the technological know-how to develop effective counter-electronic warfare capabilities. [3] Instead, it moved on to experiment with other, more rudimentary, counter-drone tactics. A favorite was the use of weather balloons, small remote-controlled planes and (perhaps ironically) unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which it used to monitor the flight paths of U.S. UAVs and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs).

Technical Failures

These early efforts were met with little success, but in 2009, groups affiliated with what was then al-Qaeda in Iraq managed to hack the feed of U.S. Predator and Shadow drones with off-the-shelf software called Skygrabber ([al-Jazeera](#), December 18, 2009). Encouraged by this success, the group sought to spoof the signal sent to drones, but the U.S. military quickly updated and encrypted their feed, neutralizing the effort.

In online forums, al-Qaeda has opened discussion groups to large numbers of supporters, and even outsiders, with the aim of crowdsourcing methods and alternative strategies to counter drone attacks. Some focus groups examine specific technical details and capabilities of drones, while others discuss how best to spoof, alter or jam drone signals and how to counter homing beacons. Al-Qaeda has even gone as far as to support these efforts with financial rewards for the best suggestions. Yet, as Don Ressler in his report for the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) noted, these groups have hardly proved revolutionary, with their suggestions

ranging from the plainly silly to the only somewhat effective. Al-Qaeda's suspected former intelligence chief, Abu Ubayda Abdullah al-Adam, was the only one to provide a degree of coherent advice, and even that may have proved ineffective as he was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan in early 2013 ([The News](#), April 26, 2013).

Given the failure of its technical efforts, and faced with the success of drone strikes in decimating its network, al-Qaeda largely still relies on camouflage and avoidance tactics, combined with an "old-school" targeting of the crucial human intelligence network that the United States relies on to support its drone strike campaign. Al-Qaeda has established special units that hunt down spies. In Pakistan's FATA tribal territories, the Lashkar-e-Khorasan (Khorasan Mujahideen) and Saif ul-Furqan units seek to kill spies within 24 hours after a strike. [4] Individuals suspected of sharing information about the location of militants are killed, and footage of their deaths is shared with others with the intention of discouraging other potential informants. This reliance on old-fashioned operational security has arguably been al-Qaeda's most effective counter-drone measure.

Where al-Qaeda has also had a measure of success is in disguising its bases and training camps. Over the last decade, al-Qaeda operated a number of relatively open and well-known bases in remote areas, but the use of drones means such locations are not necessarily secure. In Pakistan, where al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban have been hardest hit by drones, the group has to an extent re-located bases from the tribal areas to urban locations such as Karachi where, amongst a teeming civilian population, its operatives are more protected. [5] Precise information is critical for a successful drone strike, particularly when operating in urban areas where the risk of collateral damage is significant.

Limitations to Drone Use

Drone strikes have arguably become the U.S. government's first response to overseas terrorists and insurgent activity and an accepted instrument in the counter-terrorism policy toolkit. The discovery of the drone manuals in Mali can perhaps be read as an indication of just how successful drone strikes have been — they have unquestionably been effective at targeting individual terrorist commanders.

They do, however, have their drawbacks. It has been well documented how collateral damage from drone strikes serves as a strong recruitment and propaganda tool for al-Qaeda ([al-Jazeera](#), March 20).

Similarly, in individual cases, the use of drones has proved problematic. A botched U.S. mission in Yemen in January, in which a U.S. Navy Seal was killed along with 25 civilians, among them nine children, serves as a constructive example ([al-Monitor](#), March 3). Local AQAP fighters were on high alert as a result of a crashed drone, which went down while conducting onsite surveillance prior to the mission.

With a small drone crashing nearby, and with no strike conducted, local al-Qaeda members concluded that a ground strike was imminent. Accordingly, the drone proved to be something of rudimentary warning for the militants.

More generally, despite a 15-year-long campaign, al-Qaeda is still operational, albeit much weakened. Unsophisticated efforts at evading drones appear to be all that is needed where the aim is simply to continue militant operations in some form.

Al-Qaeda's response to drone attacks shows how adaptable the group can be. Meanwhile, drones must be seen as only part of a potential solution in the fight against terrorism.

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NOTES

[1] The manuals were discovered by journalists with the Associated Press and can be viewed [here](#).

[2] Sinai, J (2015) 'Innovation in terrorist counter-surveillance' in M Ranstorp & M Normark (Eds), *Understanding terrorism innovation and learning: Al-Qaeda and beyond* (pp. 196-210). Abingdon, UK: Routledge

[3] Ressler, Don, 'Drone, counter drone: Observations on the contest between the United States and jihadis' *CTC Sentinel*, January 2017, pp. 23-27; Williams, B (2013) *Predators: The CIA's drone war on al Qaeda*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press

[4] [Krech, H \(2014\)](#) The organization of Al Qaeda's drone countermeasures. Margalla Papers, [National Defence University, Islamabad](#), Pakistan. (Available [here](#)).

[5] *Ibid.*

Libya's Military Wild Card: The Benghazi Defense Brigades and the Massacre at Brak al-Shatti

Andrew McGregor

In shocking events on May 18, fighters in southern Libya carried out a massacre, slaughtering more than 140 soldiers and civilians, most of whom had already surrendered. The attack was carried out by a militia from the Libyan city of Misrata and their allies, the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB, *Saraya Difa al-Benghazi*), a politically enigmatic military coalition that claims it is anti-terrorist in nature while consistently being described as terrorist by its enemies. [1]

Founded on June 1, 2016, the BDB alliance combines professional soldiers, ex-policemen and a significant number of Islamist mujahideen expelled from Benghazi by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). The BDB describes itself not as an Islamist coalition, but as a group of *thumar* (revolutionary fighters) and soldiers who oppose Haftar's "oppressive" militias in their fight "for liberty, freedom and the safe return to our city [Benghazi] with our displaced families," while combatting terrorism "in all its shapes and forms" ([Libya Herald](#), April 19). [2]

Political Background

Understanding the BDB's activities first requires some familiarity with Libya's fractious administration. Libya's unity government, as determined by the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) of December 17, 2015, has devolved into a number of rival parts, including:

- The Government of National Accord (GNA), the Tripoli-based executive authority, which includes the internally divided but largely Islamist nine-member Presidency Council, the chairman of which is Fayez al-Serraj. It oversees the functions of the head-of-state and is intended to have authority over a yet-to-be formed national military. In the meantime, the GNA is supported by powerful militias from the city of Misrata.

- The Bayda/Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), the legislative authority controlled by Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni. The HoR resists the authority of the Presidency Council and has refused to transfer responsibility for the armed forces to Tripoli, endorsing instead a collection of mainly Cyrenaican militias referred to as the Libyan National Army (LNA). This force is led by Khalifa Haftar, who is broadly anti-Islamist but nonetheless includes Saudi-backed Salafist "Madkhali" fighters in his coalition.

- The High Council of State, a Tripoli-based consultative body led by Abd al-Rahman Swehli, which functions independently of the GNA.

The GNA is also challenged by the so-called "Government of National Salvation" (GNS), the Tripoli-based remains of the pre-LPA General National Council (GNC), a parliament formerly led by Misratan Khalifa al-Ghwell. The ex-PM has attempted to overturn the authority of the UN-recognized GNA, but the GNS does not control any institutions of importance.

The BDB are the avowed enemy of "Field Marshal" Haftar, regularly described in BDB statements as a "war criminal." Given Haftar is the commander of a regional militia, his absurd rank (which he was awarded by HoR parliamentarians in 2016) reflects his posturing as a new Libyan strongman who believes he alone is capable of uniting the shattered nation. Haftar is opposed by many Misratans due to his past as a Gaddafi-era general, his long association with the CIA while living as an exile in Alexandria, Virginia, and his battle to subdue Misratan influence in Benghazi and elsewhere.

Affiliation to Dar al-Ifta and the Grand Mufti

The BDB's Statement no.19 declared the group had "no party, political or ideological affiliations" ([Libya Herald](#), March 12; al-Jazeera TV via BBC Monitoring, March 12). Despite this, the movement has pledged loyalty to controversial Tripoli-based Libyan Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani and claims to operate under his authority and that of the Dar al-Ifta, Libya's fatwa-issuing authority.

Despite his status as Libya's leading cleric and recognition by the GNA and the Presidency Council, al-Ghariani is in practice a divisive influence whose leadership has already been rejected by the HoR. Al-Ghariani is opposed to any political settlement involving Haftar and

condemned a recent reconciliation meeting in Cairo between the field marshal and al-Serraj, the Presidency Council chairman.

In May 2016, the Mufti surprised many by urging all “revolutionaries” to abandon the fight against Islamic State (IS) forces in Sirte to instead concentrate their forces against the LNA in eastern Libya, claiming IS in Libya would collapse once Haftar was defeated (Al-Tanasuh TV, May 11, 2016, via BBC Monitoring).

BDB leader Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sharkasi declared last year that his fighters were “not ashamed to say we use the Dar al-Ifta as our reference ... When we are victorious in the city of Benghazi, we will revert to Islamic reference in our dealing with the people ...” (al-Nabaa TV/Twitter, via BBC Monitoring, June 21, 2016).

LNA spokesman Colonel Ahmad Mismari has repeatedly claimed that the BDB are supplied with weapons and vehicles by Qatar and Turkey (viewed as sympathetic to Islamist forces) in violation of the international arms embargo on Libya ([Libya Herald](#), March 3).

The BDB’s allegiance to al-Ghariani and the Dar al-Ifta has created friction with other groups in the capital. A BDB camp in the Suq al-Jama district of Tripoli was attacked on November 30, 2016 by RADA (“Deterrence”) forces led by Abd al-Raouf Kara, a pro-GNA militia strongly opposed to the Grand Mufti ([Libya Herald](#), December 1, 2016). The BDB are also believed to have contacts with GNS leader Khalifa Ghwell ([Libya Herald](#), March 3).

BDB Leadership

The BDB leadership includes the following individuals:

Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sharkasi, a professional soldier, has emerged as the dominant commander in the BDB. Al-Sharkasi served as an Air Force colonel at Benina airbase, 19 kilometers (km) east of Benghazi, under the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Turning against the regime, he acted as a militia commander in Misrata during the revolution. Once part of Haftar’s LNA, he is now bitterly opposed to him ([Libya Herald](#), November 13, 2016).

Ziyad Belam, sometimes cited as the BDB leader, is the former commander of Benghazi’s Omar al-Mukhtar

Brigade and leader of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), an alliance of Benghazi-based Islamist militias that once included local IS fighters. He was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt in October 2014.

Al-Saadi al-Nawfali is the leader of the Operations Room for the Liberation of the Cities of Ajdabiya and Support for the Revolutionaries of Benghazi (known by its Arabic acronym GATMJB). This group cooperates with the BDB, allowing al-Nawfali to hold leadership positions in both organizations. Al-Nawfali appeared in a 2014 video with al-Mourabitoun commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar ([AgenziaNova.com](#), June 20, 2016). He has been variously described as a former Ansar al-Sharia commander in Ajdabiya and a supporter of Islamic State forces in Nawfaliyah.

Ismail Muhammad al-Salabi was a commander in the Rafallah Sahati militia and is the brother of prominent Libyan Muslim Brotherhood member Ali Muhammad al-Salabi. Ismail is an associate of GNA Defense Minister Colonel Mahdi al-Barghathi, formerly chief of military police in Benghazi and a former LNA armored unit commander.

Osama al-Jadhran is the Ajdabiya-based brother of former Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) commander Ibrahim al-Jadhran. An Islamist who was tortured during imprisonment in the Gaddafi era at the notorious Abu Salim prison, Osama took a prominent part in the BDB’s March 2017 capture of Ras Lanuf airport.

Ahmad al-Tajuri is an artillery commander from the Tajuri district of Benghazi and former leader of the BRSC.

Faraj Shaku is a commander of the February 17 Martyrs’ Brigade and a former BSRC commander.

Mahmoud al-Fitouri is a senior commander in the BDB.

The main force of the BDB is based in Jufra (south-central Libya). Its communications are handled by its official media establishment, Bushra Media.

Operation ‘Volcano of Wrath’

The BDB launched its first offensive on Ajdabiya, 15 km southwest of Benghazi, on June 18, 2016, together with

local forces in the city opposed to the LNA. Describing the BDB as part of IS, a Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) spokesman said that the PFG was fighting the BDB in Ajdabiya under the guidance of the GNA's ministry of defense ([Libya Herald](#), June 25, 2016). Shortly after the attack on Ajdabiya, Brigadier al-Sharkasi declared that the BDB was on its way to Benghazi to "liberate it from these criminals, these people that have broken out of prison, these militias, the gangs of Haftar" (al-Nabaa TV/Twitter, via BBC Monitoring, June 21, 2016).

On July 11, 2016, the BDB announced the commencement of Operation "Volcano of Wrath," intended to break the LNA's siege of Benghazi and allow displaced residents to return (Bushra News/Twitter, via BBC Monitoring, July 17, 2016).

The BDB's offensive ultimately stalled outside of Benghazi, but not before it claimed to have shot down a helicopter containing three members of the French Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure (DGSE, Directorate General for External Security) operating in support of the LNA defenders (Bushra News/Twitter via BBC Monitoring, July 17, 2016; [ChannelsTV.com](#), February 3). Three days later, the BDB claimed a French "retaliatory" airstrike on BDB positions in western Benghazi had killed 13 of their fighters ([Libyan Express](#), July 20, 2016). Al-Sharkasi later blamed the BDB's failure to enter Benghazi on the intervention of "foreign" warplanes (al-Jazeera TV via BBC Monitoring, March 12).

Failed Attack on Sidra and Ras Lanuf

In December 2016, the BDB joined former members of the BRSC and some members of Ibrahim Jadhran's PFG in a disastrous attempt to take the important oil terminals at Sidra and Ras Lanuf. The facilities had been wrested from the PFG by the LNA in September 2016. Operating under the unified command of the "Oil Ports and Fields Liberation Room," an armed group of 600 to 800 men left Jufra in a convoy for the ports in Libya's vital "oil crescent" west of Benghazi, where they were repulsed by stronger LNA forces ([ICG](#), December 14, 2016).

The LNA responded with airstrikes on BDB positions on the Jufra airbase, killing BDB spokesman Mansur al-Faydi, PFG commander Moussa Bouain al-Moghrabi and BDB commander Ahmad al-Shaltami, a former member of Benghazi's Ansar al-Sharia ([Libya Herald](#), December

12, 2016). Brigadier Idris Musa Bughuetin and Colonel Osama al-Ubaydi, two officers close to Mahdi al-Barghathi, the GNA defense minister, were captured by the LNA ([Eyonisisinlibya.com](#), December 13, 2016).

This led to questions regarding the alleged role of the GNA's defense ministry in preparing and even ordering the failed offensive. Some verification of these allegations appeared to come through a tweet showing captured vehicles that clearly bore the markings of the ministry's 12th Brigade ([Twitter](#), December 7, 2016).

On February 9, 2017, aircraft believed to belong to either the LNA or to the UAE, which backs Haftar, struck BDB positions at the Jufra airbase, killing two people and wounding 13 others ([Libya Herald](#), February 9). The UAE uses al-Khadim airbase in Marj province for operations by AT-802 light attack aircraft and surveillance drones ([Jane's 360](#), October 28, 2016). The AT-802's are reportedly flown by American private contractors working for former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince on behalf of the UAE ([Intelligence Online](#), January 11).

Three days later, a BDB statement called for "a general mobilization by all of Libya's honorable revolutionaries, officers and soldiers" against Haftar's LNA and mercenary fighters of Darfur's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), who they claimed were fighting alongside the LNA (al-Jazeera TV via BBC Monitoring, February 12).

Operation 'Return to Benghazi'

The mobilization led to the BDB's seizure of the oil terminals at Sidra and Ras Lanuf from the LNA with a surprise attack on March 3. The BDB was able to catch the LNA off guard by moving its forces forward in small groups of two or three vehicles before concentrating its forces just outside the ports ([Libya Herald](#), March 3). An LNA spokesman said the BDB's success was due in part to its use of sophisticated jamming equipment that interfered with LNA communications ([Libya Herald](#), March 6). There were reports that Defense Minister al-Barghathi had again ordered the defense ministry's 12th Brigade to support the BDB offensive ([Libya Herald](#), March 7). There were also unconfirmed reports that the BDB had beheaded two NCOs of the LNA's 131st Infantry Battalion taken prisoner during the attack ([Libya Herald](#), March 12).

The offensive was supported by demonstrations in Tripoli and Misrata, while the Grand Mufti used a television address to urge residents of eastern Libya to join the BDB's march on Benghazi ([Libya Observer](#), March 3). After taking Ras Lanuf Airport, a BDB statement insisted that control of the oil ports was not the aim of the operation, but was only a step in assisting internally displaced persons (IDPs) forced from Benghazi by the LNA ([Libya Observer](#), March 3).

The LNA succeeded in holding the line east of the terminals at al-Uqaylah with the help of Tubu reinforcements from southern Libya, leaving some 170 km of Libya's coastline in the hands of the BDB ([Libya Herald](#), March 6).

In the days following, the Brigades repelled successive attempts by the LNA's 152 Battalion to expel them. Airstrikes, believed to be carried out by Egyptian warplanes, targeted BDB positions in the oil crescent, but the failure of Haftar's LNA created a small crisis in relations with Cairo, with urgent pleas for greater support against the BDB "terrorists" ([Libya Herald](#), March 13). Haftar advisor Abd al-Basset al-Badri was also dispatched to Moscow to ask for greater Russian support in the fight against the BDB ([Libya Herald](#), March 14).

The oil terminals were handed over to Brigadier Idris Bukhamada, an ally of Defense Minister al-Barghathi. Bukhamada was appointed head of the PFG in February 2017 by the Presidency Council to replace Ibrahim Jadhnan, who was seized by a militia in Nalut in March. The LNA was incensed that their own candidate for PFG chief, Brigadier Muftah al-Magarief, was left out in the cold ([Libya Herald](#), March 8).

During the orderly BDB withdrawal, the LNA's Colonel al-Mismari announced, "the terrorist gangs of al-Qaeda [i.e. the BDB] are fleeing Ras Lanuf" (Facebook via BBC Monitoring, March 7). Al-Mismari also accused the Presidency Council of hosting secret meetings with al-Qaeda leaders to fund and support the BDB's operations in the oil crescent ([Libya Observer](#), March 7; [Middle East Observer](#), March 7).

The LNA spokesman's accusations appear to be part of a larger campaign intended to portray Haftar's political enemies as radical Islamists with close connections to al-Qaeda and/or IS in order to rally international support for his own militia.

A Presidency Council statement condemning the seizure of the oil crescent by the BDB was in turn rejected by two Islamist members of the council — Abd al-Salam Kajman (of the Muslim Brotherhood) and Muhammad al-Amari — who instead offered their support to the "revolutionaries" ([Twitter](#), March 3; [Libya Herald](#), March 6).

The BDB, meanwhile, considered its turnover of Sidra and Ras Lanuf should be seen as proof it was part of a broad-based solution to the Libyan conflict exclusive of al-Qaeda or other extremist groups. Unlike the jihadists, the BDB has attempted to interact with the traditional enemies of the extremists, urging Egypt to play a "positive role" and stating its approval of Italy's stance on Libya. According to BDB commander Mahmoud al-Fitouri: "We are partners to the international community in fighting terrorism; we will never allow terrorist groups to deploy in the region" ([Libya Observer](#), March 9).

Massacre at Brak al-Shatti

In December 2016, the LNA's 12th Brigade took Brak al-Shatti airbase, 900 km south of Tripoli and 60 km north of the city of Sabha in Libya's southwest. The move came after the pro-GNA Misratan Third Force militia was forced to withdraw, providing the LNA with a useful base for operations in the Fezzan, a region where it had had little influence up to that point.

A priority target was the Third Force-held Tamenhint airbase outside of Sabha. Attacks on Tamenhint began in January, when the LNA's 12th Brigade (largely Maghara, Qaddadfa and Tubu, not to be confused with the GNA's 12th Brigade) under General Muhammad Ben Nayel arrived at Brak al-Shatti.

To put an end to these attacks, the BDB and the defense ministry's 13th Brigade (the re-named Misratan "Third Force") commanded by Colonel Jamal al-Treiki launched a surprise assault on Brak al-Shatti at 9:30am on May 18, driving most of the garrison into the desert. The assault was apparently timed to coincide with the ill-advised withdrawal of much of the LNA's 12th Brigade to the town of Tukrah (northeast of Benghazi) for a celebration of the third anniversary of Khalifa Haftar's "Operation Dignity."

As many as 141 men were executed — their throats slit, or by a single bullet to the head — after the airbase was captured, including fighters of the LNA's 10th and 12th

Brigades and seven civilian truck drivers delivering rations to the base ([Libya Herald](#), May 18; [Libya Herald](#), May 19).

Local hospital officials told Human Rights Watch that nearly all military personnel delivered to the hospital had received a bullet wound to the front of the head. Others arrived still bound and some had injuries consistent with having their heads run over by a vehicle. No LNA wounded arrived at the hospital and there were no casualties from the attackers, suggesting the airbase had been quickly overrun with little resistance. Survivors and videos indicated the LNA prisoners were verbally abused before being killed as “apostates, enemies of God, mercenaries of Haftar and dogs of Haftar” ([Human Rights Watch](#), May 21). General Ben Nayel’s nephew, Ali Ibrahim Ben Nayel, was among those reported killed in the attack ([Libya Herald](#), May 18). After the massacre, the assailants withdrew to their base in Jufra, allowing escaped elements of the 12th Brigade to return along with LNA reinforcements.

Even though the Misratan 13th Brigade falls under the ultimate authority of the UN-backed Presidency Council, that body insisted it had no role in the attack ([Libya Herald](#), May 19). The Council suspended Mahdi al-Barghathi as defense minister on May 19 pending an investigation. The Council also suspended the Third Force/13th Brigade commander, Colonel al-Treiki, though the Council has little effective authority over the Misratan militia ([Libya Observer](#), May 20). No measures were taken against the BDB, which operates outside of GNA control.

On May 19, the 13th Brigade warned the Presidency Council to “reconsider” its statements rejecting responsibility for “the cleansing of the Brak airbase of Islamic State members,” claiming they had documentary proof they had operated on the direct orders of the defense minister and the Presidency Council (Facebook, via BBC Monitoring, May 19). The reference to IS was unexplainable; there was no possibility the garrison at Brak al-Shatti could have been mistaken for IS terrorists.

The LNA’s Colonel al-Mismari claimed the attack was planned and led by Islamist Libyan Shield Southern District commander Ahmad Abd al-Jalil al-Hasnawi ([Libya Herald](#), May 19; Channel TV [Amman], May 22, via BBC Monitoring). Al-Hasnawi, a GNA loyalist, led members of his Hasawna tribe into Tamenhint airbase on April 15 to

support the Misratan Third Force ([Jihadology.net](#), April 19).

According to the LNA’s 12th Brigade, a number of foreign prisoners were taken following the action, including a Palestinian, a Chadian and two Malians. A unit spokesman said 70 percent of the fighters they had killed or taken prisoner were foreign nationals, adding: “We are convinced we are fighting al-Qaeda” ([Libya Herald](#), May 20).

LNA retaliation for the massacre came on May 21 in the form of multiple airstrikes by LNA MiG-23 “Floggers” on BDB facilities at Jufra airbase, civilian targets in the city of Hun (the capital of Jufra district) and bases of Misratan militias that had previously fought IS in Sirte ([Libyan Express](#), May 21; [Libya Observer](#), May 21; [Libya Observer](#), May 23; [Libya Observer](#), May 24).

The LNA spokesman claimed the targets in Jufra belonged to al-Qaeda. He also announced the expulsion from Sabha of Humat Libya, a local militia that he claimed, on the basis of interrogations of “foreign fighters,” had participated in the slaughter at Brak al-Shatti ([Libya Herald](#), May 23).

Though securing Tamenhint was given as the reason for the assault on Brak al-Shatti, the LNA announced on May 25 that the Misratan militia had withdrawn from the airbase, leaving it to be taken by the LNA’s 12th Brigade with support from the 116th Brigade ([Libya Herald](#), May 25).

Dangerous and Unpredictable

IS-style atrocities are hard to reconcile with the BDB’s occasional efforts to engage responsibly with internal and international partners in Libya’s ongoing political process.

The BDB is more of a military coalition than a cohesive political movement under a single command and is thus subject to internal differences and dissolution or expansion at any time, particularly in Libya’s current over-heated political climate in which personal differences can lead to command ruptures overnight. The complex mix of leaders and fighters comprising the BDB almost ensures the improbability of defining a specific ideology guiding the coalition, other than a shared hatred of Haftar’s authoritarianism and a determination that the field

marshal will never play a role in Libya's political or military future.

Acting outside the control of any of Libya's rival political institutions, the BDB has become a dangerous and unpredictable wild-card in the political process. The brutal attack on Brak al-Shatti effectively derailed some of the most promising steps taken towards political reconciliation in Libya.

Rather than being reined in by more responsible armed elements supporting the GNA, the BDB appears to have entered a military alliance with the powerful Misratan Third Force/13th Brigade with the unauthorized support and approval of elements in the GNA's defense ministry.

The BDB has strayed far from its initial mission of "liberating" Benghazi from Haftar's control, and the LNA's penetration of the Fezzan has provided the BDB with new battlefields, possibly as a proxy for external anti-Haftar actors such as Turkey and Qatar.

Until the BDB is either eliminated or brought under effective control by one of the recognized political factions in Libya, it will retain the capacity to disrupt diplomatic efforts to arrive at a much-needed political solution to Libya's internal chaos.

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NOTES

[1] The terms "brigade" and "battalion" are often used interchangeably when referring to Libyan militias, which rarely if ever equal the approximately 4,000 men in three battalions that form a typical US army brigade. The actual size of any unit may fluctuate on a continual basis according to military and political fortunes.

[2] *Thuwar*, or "revolutionaries," as used by the BDB and their allies, usually refers to Islamist militias opposed to Khalifa Haftar and the LNA. Radical Islamist jihadists rejecting the political process in its entirety tend to refer to themselves and their allies as "mujahideen." The distinction is important in defining how the BDB see themselves in the context of the Libyan conflict.