IRAQ: POLITICAL DIFFERENCES AND OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Alexander Sehmer

As Iraq moves into the next stage of its campaign against Islamic State (IS), political rivalries, sectarian divisions and the outside influence of regional players are conspiring to hamper efforts to tackle the terrorist group.

Backed by air strikes, Iraqi forces have begun moving in on IS fighters in Tal Afar, the final IS stronghold in northern Iraq's Nineveh governorate (Twitter, August 7; Iraqi News, August 7). This is the next phase of the battle following the July 10 liberation of Mosul. Despite that victory, there is still a long way to go.

Three years under IS rule and a massive military operation to recapture the city have left Mosul in ruins. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced, and with years of rebuilding ahead, few are ready to return home (Rudaw, August 9). At the same time, both Iraqi forces and the Shia militias that aided in the liberation of Mosul have been accused of carrying out abuses in the city (Baghdad Post, August 7; Rudaw, July 20).

The Hashd al-Shaabi (PMU, Popular Mobilization Units) — a collection of predominantly Shia militias formed in 2014, though not all of them are in fact Shia — have proved to be an important and effective player in the battle against IS, but have become increasingly difficult for the government to control. Nonetheless, the organization appears likely to remain a fixture of the Iraqi security landscape. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has ruled out dissolving the PMUs, a demand made by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who wants the more "disciplined" PMU fighters to be absorbed into the Iraqi army (al-Jazeera, August 5). In truth, al-Sadr's concern over the PMUs may come from the fact that they include a number of his own political rivals.

Having previously fought IS on the outskirts of Tal Afar, the Shia militias were warned not to enter the town, but now it appears that PMU fighters will take part in the new offensive (Anadolu, July 29). That will set the stage for disagreements between Iran — Iran sponsors a number of the PMU militias and would be pleased to see them take Tal Afar — and Turkey, which sees itself as the protector of Sunni Turkmen living in the city and fears that there will be sectarian reprisals similar to the abuses reported in Mosul.

Meanwhile, Iraq's Sunni politicians are also struggling to find common ground. Rival reconciliation meetings, including a conference organized by parliamentary speaker Salim al-Jabouri, have failed to get off the ground (New Arab, July 13). Those disagreements are likely exacerbated by the diplomatic spat between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, since both Gulf States back various Iraqi Sunni parties, with al-Jabouri thought be favored by Qatar (al-Monitor, June 11).

All told, the region's troublesome politics risk hampering the next stage of the battle against IS, to say nothing of the Iraqi government's efforts to rebuild communities in areas that have suffered terribly under the terrorist group.

SOMALIA: MOGADISHU UNDER PRESSURE

Alexander Sehmer

Mogadishu has seen an increase in attacks in recent months, and the withdrawal of African Union troops from a nearby town has piled on the pressure in Somalia's capital.

One person was killed and several others injured when a car bomb exploded near a hospital on the main Maka al-Mkarramah road on August 4 (Somali Update, August 4). A bombing on the same stretch of road, orchestrated by al-Shabaab less than a week earlier, killed at least five people and injured several others (Garowe Online, July 30). In a separate incident, just hours after the August 4 blast, al-Shabaab gunmen in the capital shot and killed Mohamed Ali Elmi, the provincial governor of the Galgadud region, along with his brother (All Africa, August 8). Elmi was reportedly in Mogadishu visiting relatives.

Residents of Somali capital are on edge — bodyguards for one Somali politician mistakenly shot dead two civilians during a demonstration by motorcycle taxi drivers on August 7 (Radio Dalsan, August 7).

Away from the capital, militants re-took the town of Lego in the Lower Shabelle region on August 4, after Ugandan troops with the African Union mission in Somalia (AMISOM) withdrew from their base there. The area is a prize for al-Shabaab, their fighters having staged a major attack on the base in 2015 (al-Jazeera, June 26, 2015). Situated on a major road about 100 kilometers (km) northwest of the capital, having Lego in the hands of the militants reduces transport options into Mogadishu. Reports indicate that the militants arrived within minutes of the AMISOM convoys moving out (Defence Web, August 4).

Mogadishu is coming under pressure. Victories such as the recent killing in a drone strike of al-Shabaab commander Ali Mohamed Hussein (a.k.a. Ali Jabal), who was responsible for coordinating many attacks on the Somali capital, provide relatively little relief (Mareeg, July 31). AMISOM troops are expected to start drawing down next year, and it is doubtful that Somali forces will be ready to take up the slack. Despite the successes of the U.S.-trained Gashaan counter-terrorism force, the Somali National Army (SNA) lacks cohesion and seems ill-equipped to cope.

The same regional divides that beset the SNA are also a major hurdle for Somalia as it attempts to combat al-Shabaab, though there have been some small successes. In July, the United Nations heralded joint police patrols in Gaalkayo, where the city's administration is divided between Puntland and Galmudung, states that have frequently clashed.

The joint patrols are part of a ceasefire agreement signed on January 1, and their main purpose will be to ensure the continuation of that deal. Perhaps in an indication of how effective such coordination can be, it was a joint operation by Puntland and Galmudug security forces in Gaalkayo last month that resulted in the capture of al-Shabaab commander Abdirsak Hussein Tahlil (All Africa, July 25).

De-escalation Deal Means Tricky Transition for Southern Syria Rebels

Nicholas A. Heras

In early July, the United States, Russia and Jordan agreed to support a "de-escalation zone" in the southwestern Syrian governorates of al-Quneitra, Daraa and part of the governorate of Suwayda (TASS, July 31; Hurriyet, July 22). The de-escalation zone agreement was the product of a separate but related diplomatic process to the ongoing Astana and Geneva negotiations that are seeking to achieve a mechanism for a sustainable ceasefire and political framework to end the Syrian civil war (Hurriyet, August 8; Hal.net [Daraa], July 18; TASS, July 10).

A key component of the southwestern Syria de-escalation zone agreement, which is being made in consultation with Israel, is an understanding that the armed opposition movement in southern Syria — specifically the Southern Front coalition — will transform from an anti-government force to a local security force for opposition-controlled areas. It is expected that it will conduct counterterrorism operations and provide security for the Israeli and Jordanian borders (Haaretz August 9; al-Watan, July 30). [1]

Border Security Fears

To date, the exact contours of the de-escalation zone agreement in southern Syria remain unclear. However, representatives of the Syrian opposition expect that Russia will be responsible for guaranteeing that forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad adhere to the ceasefire, and that it will prevent Lebanese Hezbollah and foreign Shia militias mobilized by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from being deployed in the de-escalation zone. Meanwhile, the United States and Jordan, in consultation with Israel, are reportedly responsible for ensuring the compliance of the armed opposition with the ceasefire, and for reorganizing the Southern Front coalition into a force that is less threatening to Bashar al-Assad (The National, July 10; al-Ghad [Amman], July 10). [2]

Disagreements over the future of the armed opposition's battle against al-Assad, and the desire of the United States, Jordan and Israel to draw down the conflict in southwestern Syria, are major points of contention between the Southern Front and its foreign backers (Enab Baladi, August 8; al-Baladi News [Daraa], July 15; al-Monitor, July 14).

In particular, the Israeli government has voiced strong public skepticism about the de-escalation zone agreement over the question of whether Lebanese Hezbollah and IRGC-mobilized Shia militias would still be able to operate near the Israeli side of the Golan Heights (Haaretz, August 9; Times of Israel, July 16; Haaretz, April 7). Israel provides support for some Southern Front organizations, which are located on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights in al-Quneitra governorate, acting as a de facto border security force against both IRGC-aligned forces and militant Salafist organizations (al-Monitor, July 21; Middle East Review of International Affairs, July 3; Syria Deeply, June 15).

Jordan is similarly concerned with its northern border security, focusing on stability on its border with southwestern Syria and on managing the threat from IRGC-mobilized forces and Islamic State (IS) along a 250 kilometer (km) stretch of its northern border with Syria, in the contested Syrian Desert region (Asharq al-Awsat, February 1; see also Terrorism Monitor, March 18, 2016). [3]

Southern Front-aligned armed opposition groups, which are active combatants against both IS and forces loyal and allied to the al-Assad government, continue to operate with support from Jordan in the Syrian Desert region and are not currently a party to the southwestern de-escalation zone (al-Rai [Amman], August 6; al-Hayat, August 1, al-Jazeera, May 15; see also Terrorism Monitor, March 18, 2016).

The major counter-terrorism threats in southwestern Syria, from the perspective of the Southern Front's foreign backers, are Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC-mobilized militias, as well as the IS-affiliated Salafist militants of *Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid* (JKW, Khalid ibn al-Walid Army), and potentially al-Qaeda's *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS, Levant Liberation Organization). [4] JKW, designated as a terrorist organization by the United Nations and the United States, controls a swath of territory in the Yarmouk Valley in the extreme southwestern corner of

Daraa, in an area that borders Jordan's northern Irbid governorate.

A major source of tension between the United States and the southern Syrian armed opposition has been the inability of the Southern Front over the past year and a half to mount an effective campaign to defeat JKW (SMART News Agency [Daraa], July 5; al-Quds al-Arabi, June 9). This ineffectiveness is the result of a variety of factors, particularly tribal, clan and family ties between JKW fighters and Southern Front affiliates, which would require the armed opposition forces to pay *diya* (blood money) to the families of slain JKW fighters, money that its foreign backers have not provided.

These tribal ties also cross the Jordanian border into Irbid governorate, which has led to Jordanian unwillingness to support an all-out campaign against JKW that could lead to tensions on both sides of the border.

These socio-political factors, combined with the U.S.-led coalition's focus on IS in eastern Syria, have dampened support for the Southern Front campaign against JKW and allowed the IS affiliate to survive. Syrian opposition officials expect that an early priority of the United States once the de-escalation zone is implemented will be to pressure the Southern Front to mount a large-scale offensive to conquer JKW. [5]

A Trouble Transition

Related to the JKW challenge is the question of whether the foreign backers of the Southern Front can successfully convince the armed opposition to become a counterterrorism force in their home areas.

The foreign backers of the armed opposition in Syria share a common interest to reconstitute the Southern Front from a large umbrella coalition into smaller, more tightly coordinated organizations responsible for specific regions of southwestern Syria (al-Aman [Daraa], August 4; Enab Baladi, July 30; Orient News, July 22). However, this effort is complicated by the U.S. government's decision to cease a covert program that provided military support and training for vetted armed opposition groups, including in southern Syria, through the Military Operations Center (MOC), said to be in Amman (SMART News Agency [Daraa], July 29).

Syrian opposition officials are also concerned that the process of reorganizing the armed opposition from the Southern Front into an alternate force will be hamstrung by Jordan's limited ability to pay the salaries of opposition fighters, a move needed to convince armed opposition fighters to transition from an anti-Assad force into the new role of a counter-IS force.

The success of the southwestern Syrian de-escalation zone for the counterterrorism objectives of the foreign backers of the southern Syrian armed opposition will depend on the ability of the Southern Front coalition to become a long-term local security force. However, Southern Front leaders are unwilling to give up the fight against the al-Assad government, the armed opposition's principle adversary for more than half a decade.

Rebels in southwestern Syria are seeking to reassert their agency, which may lead to further conflicts between the transitioning Southern Front and its primary foreign backers. Such a situation would provide extremist organizations such as IS and HTS the opportunity to benefit from the weakness of the Southern Front, to recruit and turn fighters against a foreign project that would inhibit their ability to protect their families and the areas they had seized from al-Assad.

That scenario would likely lead to the collapse of the de-escalation zone agreement, and a metastasizing militant Salafist threat in southwestern Syria that could prompt further violence among the rebel movement or greater conflict with the al-Assad government.

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NOTES

[1] Interviews with a senior advisor to the Syrian opposition's High Negotiating Committee and a Syrian political advisor to the Southern Front coalition based in the Middle East. Both interviewees requested anonymity to speak candidly about sensitive topics related to ongoing discussions with foreign partners. Interviews conducted on August 8, 2017. For more information on the Southern Front see: [Terrorism Monitor](), March 18, 2016; [Terrorism Monitor](), March 6, 2014.
[2] Ibid.

[3] Interview with Suha Maayeh, a Jordanian journalist based in Amman (August 7, 2017).
[4] Interviews with a senior advisor to the Syrian opposition's High Negotiating Committee and a Syrian political advisor to the Southern Front coalition based in the Middle East (August 8, 2017). Both interviewees requested anonymity to speak candidly about sensitive topics related to ongoing discussions with foreign partners.
[5] Ibid.

Al-Qaeda's Quiet Resurgence in India

Animesh Roul

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the official South Asian branch of the transnational al-Qaeda network, has spread its tentacles in the region beyond its strongholds. Beyond Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, its influence has reached neighboring India and Myanmar. The emergence of the so-called Base Movement AQIS has not only found support and garnered much ground over the past few years with the existing militant formations and disgruntled militants in India, but it has also taken advantage of existing community conflicts, mostly in southern India, and troubled Kashmir in the north.

AQIS and India

Al-Qaeda's South Asian branch is headquartered in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but it has been attempting to infiltrate India since September 2014, when Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the formation of this dedicated South Asia branch (in Arabic, *Jamaat Qaidat al-jihad fishibhi al-Qarrat al-Hindiya*). However, with a relatively strong presence in neighboring Bangladesh and Pakistan, AQIS has struggled to make headway in India, despite the efforts of its chief, Sheikh Asim Umar — his legal name is Sana ul Haq— an Indian national from Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, who is now based in Pakistan.

He attempted to recruit and nurture an exclusively Indian branch. In late 2015, an embryonic AQIS unit was exposed, and at least 12 of its core operatives have since been either arrested or identified, including Muhammed Asif, Abdur Rehman and Abdul Sami, operatives from Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand respectively (Zee News, January 19, 2016).

On August 11, another suspected core operative of AQIS, Syed Mohammed Zeshan Ali, was arrested by Delhi police after he was deported back to India from Saudi Arabia. Zeshan is reportedly married to the sister of Kafeel Ahmed, one of the perpetrators of an unsuccessful attack on the Glasgow airport in the United Kingdom in June 2007 (Times of India, August 11).

Long before the establishment of AQIS, al-Qaeda has attempted to recruit from the Indian Muslim community. In June 2013, Asim Umar, the present chief of AQIS, made specific calls to Indian Muslims in a video message titled "Why is there no storm in your Ocean?," in which he exhorts Indian Muslims to join the global Jihadist movement (YouTube, May 23, 2015).

Most recently, in an attempt to reinvigorate its efforts to expand its footprints in South Asia, AQIS released a 20-page "code of conduct" document, reiterating its allegiance to al-Zawahiri and Afghan Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada. The document also depicted its long-term Islamist objectives and noted AQIS' belief that "[the] Indian state is the fundamental obstacle in the formation of an Islamic India." [1]

Even though the nascent AQIS unit in India is currently in disarray, al-Qaeda's jihadist ideology has helped to consolidate militant and extremist elements in the hinterlands of India. An August 2016 message purportedly from AQIS highlighted the death of Hizbul Mujahdeen commander Burhan Wani of Kashmir in an attempt to unite Muslim youths in South India. Social media pages sympathetic to the AQIS cause also published appeals to potential members in South India in local languages.

The Base Movement Emerges

In southern India, the so-called "Base Movement" (BM) came to public attention with a series of bombings in 2016. Little is known about this al-Qaeda affiliate's origin, but it appears to have existed in some form since January 2015 when, shortly after the attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, a threatening letter bearing the group's name was sent to the Tamil daily *Dinamalar* newspaper. It read "Yesterday Paris – *Charlie Hebdo*, Tomorrow *Dinamalar*" apparently indicating a planned attack similar to the one in Paris (The Hindu, January 28, 2015). However, the authorities questioned the letter's authenticity and no attack occurred.

The BM name surfaced again in January 2016 when similar threatening letters were set to state authorities in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. One of these letters also issued a threat in response to the visit of then French President Francois Hollande, who was schedule to visit India that month (DNA India, January 21, 2016).

The letters reportedly threatened attacks mostly in Southern states. At least five low intensity blasts targeting law courts occurred in 2016: in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh (April 7); Kollam and Mysore, Karnataka (June 15 and August 1, respectively); Nellore, Andhra Pradesh (September 12); and Malappuram, Kerala (November 1).

The letters spoke in general terms about "retaliation for injustices to the Muslim community in India," and they threatened to avenge the hanging of Yakub Memon, the man convicted over 1993 Mumbai bombings, and the June 2004 killing of Lashkar- e Taiba's Ishrat Jahan in Ahmedabad, Gujarat (Manorama Online November 3, 2016). The letters were signed "Base Movement – Kovai," providing an early lead to investigators — Kovai is the local name of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu. The letters were traced back to Singanallur in the city of Coimbatore (Deccan Chronicle, October 2).

Since then, India's National Investigation Authority (NIA) has taken over the probe into the alleged Base Movement attacks, arresting four suspects in November last year — Abbas Ali, Suleiman Muhammad Abdullah, Samsun Karim Raja and Mohamed Ayub Ali. It appeared that most of the court blasts were connected with the judicial trials of Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) cadres. All of the bombings were said to be linked to remnants of the banned al-Umma militant group, active in South India since the late 1990s, and SIMI members, organized under the Base Movement.

Leaflets and digital thumb-drives found at the sites of the blasts appeared to corroborate the link. Interrogations of the suspects, as well as forensic investigations into the letters and the materials used in the blasts, appeared to substantiate the findings. Information available to the investigating agencies suggested that the now defunct al-Umma cadres and other fringe elements had pledged their allegiance to AQIS sometime in 2015.

Police suspected a senior al-Umma operative, Abdul Rahman, was in touch with AQIS members in Pakistan and India. Meanwhile, media reports citing intelligence sources claim that Abu Bakr Siddique, the al-Umma leader, heads the Base Movement (News Minute, November 5, 2016).

Several of the group's operatives have been arrested since November 2016. Most recently, in April this year, two individuals from the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu,

Abu Bakr and Abdur Rahman, were apprehended (Manorama Online, April 10).

Although its origins are unclear, al-Umma has been around since the mid-1980s, but it turned to violence and became well organized all over the state of Tamil Nadu only following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, under Syed Ahmed Basha.

Al-Umma became well-known within Islamist circles after it perpetrated a series of bomb blasts targeting the offices of the Hindu right-wing organization *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in Chennai in August 1993, and later as a result of the Coimbatore bombings in February 1998 (DNA India, June 21, 2007; Rediff.com, February 14, 1998).

Renewing a 'Holy War'

The June 2017 "code of conduct" document specifically focuses on Kashmir in India, making it amply clear that India's security apparatus — the police, military and intelligence agencies — as well as leaders of right wing Hindu organizations would be prime targets. This is in tandem with al-Zawahiri's April 2006 video message praising jihadist movements against the Indian establishment in Jammu and Kashmir.

Shortly after the "code of conduct" was released, AQIS formally established and endorsed a new jihadist group, *Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind* (AGH, Supporters of Holy War in India), in Kashmir under the Hizbul Mujahideen renegade militant Zakir Rashid Bhat (Musa), with a media wing named al-Hurr.

The formation of the new outfit was announced in a statement on July 27 by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), an al-Qaeda-affiliated information network (Telegraph India, July 27). But the newly formed group has faced a few successive setbacks in the early weeks of August this year, when Abu Dujana al-Pasha and Arif Lelhari, two top AGH leaders, were killed in an ongoing Indian army counter offensive against militant leaders in Kashmir's Pulwama district (India Today, August 1). On August 9, three more AGH operatives — identified as Zahid Ahmad Bhat, Mohammad Ishaq Bhat and Mohammad Ashraf Dar — were killed by the Indian military in the Tral area of Pulwama (Telegraph India, August 10).

Both Musa and al-Zawahiri paid tribute to al-Pasha, declaring that the Lashkar-e Taiba militant was a driving force behind AGH who had been instrumental in uniting several jihadist groups in India (Brighter Kashmir, August 5; India Today, August 4).

AQIS' renewed efforts to reinvigorate jihad against India comes at a time when the international focus has been on defeating Islamic State (IS) in its Middle Eastern strongholds and the Indian government's attention has been on containing the spread of IS influence over the many caliphate sympathizers at home. Among those are returnees from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. However, while the authorities have been intently focused on IS, al-Qaeda's quiet resurgence in India has been largely overlooked.

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NOTES

[1] "Code of Conduct: Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent", As Sahab Media Subcontinent, June 2017. https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/al-qacc84_idah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-22code-of-conduct22-en.pdf

The Uighurs and China's Regional Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Zachary Abuza

Members of China's Uighur population have played a small but important role in the spread of global jihad, and Beijing is playing an increasingly assertive role in pursuing them as China's influence grows.

China's Uighur exodus began following the 2009 riots in Xinjiang that led to the deaths of nearly 200 people. At first, China relied on economic instruments to pressure its neighbors into returning them — just two days after Cambodia returned 20 fleeing Uighurs, Beijing signed economic cooperation deals valued at $1.2 billion with Phnom Penh (Phnom Penh Post, November 4, 2010). China's "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) initiative and the Asian International Investment Bank (AIIB) have allowed it to further flex its considerable economic muscle in order to get its way in the region. Meanwhile, in the background, China has also been more assertive in its use of legal and law-enforcement instruments.

Increasingly, China is pushing for extraterritorial policing powers, and its security forces routinely patrol the Mekong River in Laos and Myanmar waters. Despite a good deal of sympathy in the region for the plight of the Uighurs, Southeast Asian nations have been receptive to Chinese "counter terrorism" efforts.

A Self-Inflicted Insurgency

Since the 1990s, China has responded to the growth of its Uighur insurgency with intense repression. The arrest of moderate Uighurs such as Ibrahim Tohti, the "Hanization" of urban Xinjiang and the systematic repression of the Muslim community and the visible manifestations of their faith have led to a steady exodus of Uighurs from China to Turkey via Southeast Asia (al-Jazeera, December 12, 2014; al-Jazeera, March 12; al-Jazeera, April 1).

This is a self-inflicted crisis: "Between 1990 and 2010, the Chinese government gradually turned Uighur national identity and Islamic practices into national security threats, i.e., extremized/securitized them." [1] Since

then, the government has gone even further, passing laws that ban the use of Muslim names and forcing men to shave their beards. It has banned women from covering their heads, collected DNA samples *en masse*, seized passports and prevented children from receiving a religious education (The Guardian, June 23).

Crackdowns in Xinjiang escalated in 2013 and 2014, with an estimated 700 people killed in violence (Benar News, March 15, 2015). In Xinjiang in 2014, there were a total of 27,164 arrests, a 95 percent increase from 2013 (Tianshannet, January 23, 2015). In 2014, Chinese courts convicted 712 people for the incitement of separatism, terrorism and related charges. In 2015, that number jumped to 1,419. Almost all of those convicted were Uighurs (al-Jazeera, March 13, 2016).

While the majority of terrorist attacks were perpetrated within Xinjiang, militants were able to detonate a car bomb in Tiananmen Square in 2009. However, it was a wave of attacks in places like Kunming — knife wielding assailants killed 29 people and wounded 143 others in a crowded train station — that provoked outrage on Chinese social media and forced the government to intensify their already repressive measures.

The exodus of Uighur refugees and migrants turned into a steady stream (al-Jazeera, February 18, 2015). In April 2014, Thailand arrested 16 of them. That month, another 16 Uighurs tried to cross into Vietnam. After being detained, they attacked the Vietnamese police, resulting in a shootout (BBC, April 29, 2014). In December 2014, Vietnam returned 43 more Uighurs to China (al-Jazeera, December 24, 2014).

By 2014, there was increasing evidence of well-organized human trafficking networks. Thai police rescued some 200 Uighurs from a human smuggling ring in southern Thailand. In 2014, Thailand detained 350 Uighurs. In October 2014, Malaysian authorities detained 155 Uighurs, 44 of them children, who were found crammed into two apartments in Kuala Lumpur (The Star [Malaysia], October 4, 2014). Many of the Uighurs were carrying Turkish passports, which are suspected of being fake.

Changing Global Context: The Rise of IS

The emergence of what was then Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in 2014, which spread like wildfire across Iraq and Syria and attracted foreign fighters from around the world, marked a significant change for China in relation to its Uighur exodus.

China has long linked the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uighur separatist movement, to al-Qaeda, and indeed ETIM had ties to al-Qaeda affiliates such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. [2]

There has been a small but steady recruitment of Uighurs by Islamic State (IS). Using four different data sets from 2014 to 2015, Clint Watts, who has poured through the data, including Islamic State (IS) personnel files, estimated that between 0.6 to 4.3 percent of the foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria were Chinese nationals (War on The Rocks, June 1, 2016).

Nate Rosenblatt's analysis of IS personnel records identified only 114 fighters from Xinjiang. On a provincial basis, however, this makes Xinjiang the fifth highest source of foreign fighters in the Muslim world. [3] Largely untrained, they joined IS after the establishment of the Caliphate, although he concluded that the more militarily seasoned Uighurs fought with the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) — the re-booted version of ETIM — rather than IS.

Ahmed Rashid has also reported that Uighurs are part of a Central Asian unit of al-Qaeda's al-Nusrah Front (al-Jazeera, April 25, 2016). And China has pressured Pakistan to force Uighurs out of Taliban-linked madrassas. (al-Jazeera, February 18, 2015)

Unsurprisingly, Pakistan has been the beneficiary of massive Chinese investment through its OBOR development program and AIIB lending. China, likewise, tied aid and assistance to Afghanistan in exchange for a crackdown on Uighurs.

In April 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi identified China in a sermon as a state that has systematically repressed Muslims (SITE, July 1, 2014). In 2017, IS central media singled out China in a video, which features a Uighur fighter issuing this threat before executing an alleged informant: "Oh, you Chinese who do not understand what people say. We are the soldiers of the Caliphate, and we will come to you to clarify to you with the tongues of our weapons, to shed blood like rivers and avenging the oppressed" (al-Jazeera, March 1).

The Southeast Asia Connection

However, not all Uighur militants found their way to Iraq and Syria, or Pakistan and Afghanistan. A handful also made their way to join Islamist militants in Southeast Asia. In September 2014, Indonesian authorities arrested four Uighurs in Poso in Central Sulawesi, fighting with the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), a splinter of the al-Qaeda affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which pledged allegiance to IS in 2014.

The four Uighurs traveled from Cambodia to Malaysia, to Makassar in South Sulawesi, before being taken to join the MIT in Poso, where they hoped to receive bomb-making and other military training (Benar News, June 12, 2015). Captured by Indonesian security forces, they were charged with terrorism related offences. Their trial, however, was complicated by the lack of a Uighur translator and the fact that the men, who were carrying Turkish passports, claimed to be Turkish. Turkey stood up for them, but the four were convicted in July 2015 and appealed their verdict (Benar News, July 16, 2015).

Nonetheless, the pipeline has continued. In sweeps of IS cells in December 2015, Indonesian police arrested a Uighur man in an IS militant's house in Bekasi, West Java, confiscating a suicide vest and bomb-making materials.

Indonesian police arrested another Uighur in the Bekasi operation (The Age, December 23, 2015). Also, Indonesian security forces killed two Uighurs in Central Sulawesi in March 2016 (Jakarta Post, March 17, 2016). By August, security forces had killed six Uighurs fighting alongside the MIT (Jakarta Post, April 25, 2016; Jakarta Globe, April 27, 2016).

An IS cell based in Batam, Indonesia was broken up before it was able to stage attacks in nearby Singapore, and accused, alongside terrorism offences, of helping to smuggle Uighurs into the country (Today [Singapore], August 12, 2016; Straits Times, August 14, 2016). The leader of the cell received two payments, one for $2,000 and the other for $1,900, from suspected ETIM members through Western Union in October 2015. He used Telegram to arrange their travel (Straits Times, Aril 10). Indeed, the six-man Batam cell was convicted in June 2017, not for plotting terrorist attacks on Singapore, but for human trafficking.

In February 2017, Malaysian authorities arrested a seven-person cell planning to execute a car bomb attack. The cell was led by an Indonesian, who was unable to enter Syria, and included four Yemenis and a Uighur (The Star [Malaysia], March 6).

China Takes Notice

China has taken notice of the growing involvement of Uighurs overseas, identifying the international network as a direct threat.

Upon the arrest of the first four Uighurs in September 2014, China dispatched three intelligence officials to Indonesia to attend their trial, arrange for their extradition and enlist the support of Indonesia's Densus-88 security force to go after other Uighur suspects.

A preliminary agreement was signed with Indonesia's counterterrorism agency, Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme (BNPT), stating the Uighurs would be prosecuted and that: "Once the indictment is completed, they will be returned to China. After that, it's up to the Chinese government whether they want to detain them, sentence them to death, or free them. It depends on the laws in force there" (Benar News, March 19, 2015).

The sensitivity of these arrangements cannot be overstated. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, there is considerable public sympathy for the Uighurs, and since 2013, Malaysia had been an important transit corridor for Uighurs making their way to Turkey.

The Malaysians, however, have come under intense pressure from the Chinese. Between 2013 and 2016, Malaysia deported 28 Uighur militants to China, based on an intelligence-sharing agreement between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing, finding the Chinese evidence that all 28 were members of ETIM convincing enough to warrant deportation (Straits Times, January 13).

The Erawan Shrine Bombing

Thailand was also an important part of the overland corridor for fleeing Uighurs. In 2014, following the country's military coup, the unpopular ruling junta quickly tilted toward China. While much media attention has focused on Thailand's deepened bilateral military ties to China,

the first post-coup agreement was in fact on intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism.

Thailand and China signed an agreement paving the way for the return of some 300 Uighurs (al-Jazeera, December 24, 2014). But Thai courts were not fully on board and resisted returning some of those accused (al-Jazeera, March 27, 2015). In June 2015, Thailand sent 173 Uighurs, mainly women and children, to Turkey, despite Chinese protests, claiming that they were Turkish citizens (al-Jazeera, July 9, 2015). The following month, however, Thailand returned 109 Uighur men to China in a shocking manner — the men were filmed handcuffed, hooded and with an escort of one Chinese policeman per returnee. The Thai government was defensive about this decision, arguing that at least it had not sent back all of those it detained (Reuters, July 9, 2015). Subsequently, anti-Thai riots, including an attack on the Thai embassy, took place in Ankara, Turkey.

On August 17, 2015, a bomb ripped through a crowded Hindu shrine in downtown Bangkok, killing 20 people, mostly ethnic Chinese tourists. The Thai government's handling of the attack was lacking, with shoddy police work likely intended to conform to the wishes of the military leadership that sought to pin the attack on its political opposition.

Most of the suspects fled, but one was arrested on August 30, trying to cross into Cambodia. Days later, a second arrest uncovered a safe house in Bangkok with a large stash of explosives, detonators and chemical precursors, as well as dozens of fake Turkish passports (al-Jazeera, August 30, 2015). Yusufu Mieraili, one of the men detained, was carrying a Chinese passport, giving a Xinjiang birthplace, while the lawyer for the other suspect claimed his client was born in Xinjiang, but moved to Turkey in 2004 where he received Turkish citizenship. Named Bilal Mohammed, he held a Turkish passport in the name Adem Karadag.

The Thai government remained in complete denial that this was an act of international terrorism. As soon as it failed to conform to their narrative, they wanted the case to go away. It was not until September 15 that the Thai government formally linked the shrine bombing to the Uighurs (Asian Correspondent, September 15, 2015).

They received almost no help from the Turkish government, although many of the suspects had been tracked to Turkey. Malaysia arrested eight people in connection with the Bangkok attack, four of them Uighurs, in September 2016, but Thailand never bothered to extradite them. Malaysia simply linked them to human trafficking networks (al-Jazeera, September 23, 2015).

In April 2016, Malaysia detained two more Uighurs at Thailand's request, but again Bangkok did not extradite them. Even then, senior Malaysian officials suggested they were involved in human trafficking and not terrorism (The Star [Malaysia], April 9, 2016; Straits Times, April 12, 2016).

Of 17 arrest warrants, there were only two arrests, and the trial of those two accused has been shambolic. By June 2017, there had only been two hearings at a military court, due to the lack of a translator (Khaosod, May 11, 2017). Thai authorities should be rightfully concerned that their own police work and procedures will be on trial, and they seem to have little interest in moving the case forward. Legal analysts suggest that the case could drag on until 2022 (Khaosod, June 26).

China, for its part, has been surprisingly quiet about the case, confident that it will get the cooperation it needs from Thailand going forward, although in mid-2017, it was still pressing Thailand to return 62 Uighur men and women.

Three Other Scenarios

Beyond the Uighur issue, terrorism in Southeast Asia will be a growing concern for China for three reasons.

The first is the devolving security situation in the Philippines, including the eleven-week siege of Marawi and the Abu Sayyaf's campaign of maritime kidnappings, which could put Chinese mariners at risk and inhibit trade.

Second, pogroms against the Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State, could threaten China's oil and gas pipelines and other investments in natural resource extraction. The plight of the 1.1 million Rohingya, who are denied basic legal protections, including citizenship, has been seized upon by Islamist media in general, and IS-linked media in particular. [4]

The rise of the armed movement Harakat al-Islamiyah (HAY) is troubling, but unsurprising, and the refugees in Myanmar provide a new pool of talent to recruit from and networks to penetrate (Benar News, April 15, 2016).

Finally, while IS has received the attention of security forces across Southeast Asia over the past three years, the regional al-Qaeda affiliate, JI, has quietly rebuilt its networks. [5] JI could pose a sizable threat to Indonesia should it resume violence, and the al-Qaeda connection with ETIM may prove to be important.

There is a further change afoot. Chinese private military corporations (PMCs) have proliferated since 2010, in particular along the OBOR corridor (see Jamestown's China Brief, October 4, 2016). While most of the 3,200 PMCs deployed abroad in 2016 were in Africa and Central Asia, the number in Southeast Asia is poised to grow. China has made it very clear that it wants its PMCs to be able to operate in any country along the OBOR corridor. Similarly, it may be only a matter of time before Chinese PMC's arm ships in the pirate-infested waters of the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Likewise, its new bases in the South China Sea give the PLA-Navy the capability to conduct its own patrols.

China is going to play a far more assertive role in "countering terrorism" — much of that related to pursuing Uighurs overseas — and with highly indebted neighbors and partners, Beijing will use its economic clout to demand further extra-territorial policing powers. For example, China is building $7 billion high-speed railway in Laos, whose GDP is only $10 billion.

In one of the clearest and most authoritative statements on Chinese foreign policy under President Xi Jinping, Madame Fu Ying of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee wrote that one of the three pillars of Chinese foreign policy was "cooperative security" (The Diplomat, June 22). But make no mistake, any collaboration is going to be driven by China.

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NOTES

[1] Patrik Meyer, "China's De-extremization of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," New America Foundation Policy Paper (June 2016), at https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/china-de-extremization-uyghurs-xinjiang/; see also Bob Woodruff and Karson Yiu, "What Happened When I Went to the Alleged ISIS Breeding Ground in China," ABC News, (March 29, 2016), at http://abcnews.go.com/International/bob-woodru-happened-alleged-isis-breeding-ground-china/story?id=37978740

[2] The exact number will probably never be known, but it is likely relatively small. By 2001, roughly a dozen ETIM fighters were based in Kabul under the command of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an ally of the Taliban (al-Jazeera, February 18, 2015).

[3] Nate Rosenblatt, All Jihad is Local: What ISIS' Files Tell Us About Its Fighters, New America Foundation (July 2016), at https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ISIS-Files.pdf. The top four were Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (252), Qassim, Saudi Arabia (135), Tunis, Tunisia (134), and Mecca, Saudi Arabia (124).

[4] In a speech on July 1, 2014, al-Baghdadi alluded to the Rohingya as among "oppressed" Muslim populations worldwide that IS was looking to defend.

[5] See "The Re-Emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah," (April 27, 2017) IPAC Report No. 36, at http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2017/04/IPAC_Report_36.pdf; and Gullnaz Baig, "Indonesia's veteran jihadists disapprove of the ISIS generation," Jakarta Post (April 20, 2017).