

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XV, ISSUE 22

p.1

Alexander Sehmer

BRIEFS

p.3

Sudha Ramachandran

**Al-Qaeda Joins the
Kashmir Conflict**

p.6

Michael Horton

**No Exit for Saudi
Arabia: The
Kingdom's War in
Yemen**

p.9

*Alessandro Arduino and
Nodirbek Soliev*

**Malhama Tactical
Threatens to Put China
in its Crosshairs**

YEMEN: SAUDI ARABIA TAKES AIM AT HEZBOLLAH

Alexander Sehmer

Yemen's Houthi rebels fired a long-range missile targeting the Saudi capital of Riyadh on November 4. The missile, apparently destined for King Khalid International Airport, was intercepted, but it nonetheless marks an escalation in the quagmire of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and has foregrounded Riyadh's concerns about Iranian proxies.

Since starting its war in Yemen in March 2015, Saudi Arabia has seen a number of attempted missile strikes into its territory. It blames these on Iran, which it accuses of arming and controlling the Houthis. Riyadh says its analysis of the debris from a series of Houthi-fired missiles shows that the missiles were manufactured in Iran and smuggled into Yemen ([SPA](#), November 6).

Following the November 4 attack, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel bin Ahmed went further, blaming Lebanon's Iran-backed Shia group Hezbollah ([Haaretz](#), November 6). Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah responded that such a claim was "baseless." Nasrallah went on to say that that while he condemned Saudi actions in Yemen,

Hezbollah had sent "not even a pistol" to the conflict there ([Daily Star](#) [Lebanon], November 20; [Times of Israel](#), November 20).

The Lebanese group is considered to be Iran's most successful proxy force, with a 30,000-strong militia and a dominant position in Lebanese politics. Its fighters are now in Syria, where they have proved to be a boon to the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a fellow Iranian ally, and in Iraq, where a smaller contingent are advising and training Shia militias.

The group's role in the conflict in Yemen, however, is harder to judge. Although Saudi claims may be overstated, Hezbollah too cannot be expected to be upfront about its involvement. For example, Hezbollah only publically acknowledged the presence of its fighter in Syria in 2013, when they joined Syrian forces to capture the city of Qusayr from rebel hands, though they had been operating there well before ([al-Jazeera](#), May 29, 2013).

As for Yemen, video footage from February 2016 supposedly showed a Hezbollah commander named Abu Saleh training Houthi fighters, apparently to carry out operations inside Saudi Arabia ([al-Arabiya](#), February 25,

2016). Another Hezbollah commander, Abu Ali Tabtabai, was reportedly sent from Syria to Yemen to train Houthi fighters in 2015. Meanwhile, Yemen's government in exile, backed by the Gulf States, claims to have "many documents" and other evidence that support claims about Hezbollah's role in Yemen ([WAM](#), February 26, 2016).

Hezbollah's increased strength — a direct result of its involvement in the Syrian conflict — has put Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies on edge. Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's recent indecision over his own resignation is widely seen as the result of Saudi pressure. It is an indication of just how worried Riyadh has become. Having caused a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, it appears Saudi Arabia may also be willing to risk Lebanon's stability in its attempts to curb Iranian influence in the region.

BAHRAIN: OUTSIDE INFLUENCE OR A CHANGE IN TACTICS?

Alexander Sehmer

Bahrain's security forces reportedly foiled a planned series of terrorist attacks on oil pipelines in the Kingdom this month ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), November 16). It follows an earlier explosion at a pipeline near the village of Buri, about 16 kilometers from the capital Manama. The pipeline carries crude oil from Saudi Arabia's offshore Abu Safa oil field.

Authorities claimed that the blast was the result of sabotage and "an act of terrorism" ([The National](#) [UAE], November 12). Bahraini Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa blamed Iran, a sentiment echoed by other Bahraini officials and eagerly adopted by Saudi Arabia ([Twitter](#), November 11). Iran called the allegation "childish finger pointing" ([New Arab](#), November 12).

According to the Bahraini authorities, a five-man cell directed from Iran by Qassim al-Muamen, a convicted terrorist, planned the recently thwarted attacks. The group was reportedly also planning to carry out a series of assassinations ([BNA](#), November 15).

While the Gulf States are typically quick to blame interference on outside forces, Bahrain, with its majority Shia population ruled over by a Sunni monarchy, has a number of its own disgruntled Shia militant groups that may operate autonomously but be receptive to Iranian influence.

The most significant of those groups is perhaps *Saraya al-Ashtar* (the al-Ashtar Brigades), three members of which were executed earlier this year over their involvement in a 2014 bomb attack ([al-Arabiya](#), January 15). In March, two *Saraya al-Ashtar* members — Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi — were added to the U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist list ([U.S. Department of State](#), March 17). Separately, Bahraini authorities saw some success in tackling the group in August, breaking up a ten-member cell and confiscating weapons and explosives ([Gulf News](#), August 24).

Saraya al-Ashtar came to public attention in April 2013 when it released its first statement promising attacks against Bahrain's Sunni rulers. It remains unclear to what

extent the group is supported from Tehran. However, there are certainly ideological sympathies, and the State Department's designation of Yusuf and Alawi makes clear that Iran has provided weapons, funding and training to groups in Bahrain.

Manama insists, however, that those alleged to have been plotting to bomb the pipelines arrived in the country from Iran. Certainly, attacks on oil infrastructure would mark a departure for domestic Shia militants — including *Saraya al-Ashtar* — which tend to favor targeting members of the security forces with homemade explosives.

Al-Qaeda Joins the Kashmir Conflict

Sudha Ramachandran

Militancy in Kashmir took on another complicated dimension on July 26, when al-Qaeda announced its entry into the strife-torn Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. In a statement issued by the Global Islamic Media Front, al-Qaeda's propaganda wing, [Zakir Rashid Bhat \(a.k.a. Zakir Musa\)](#) was announced as head of Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), the group's affiliate in Kashmir ([Kashmir Monitor](#), July 27).

India's security establishment is concerned, ranking Musa at the top of its list of the five most-wanted terrorists in the Kashmir Valley ([NDTV](#), October 5). However, whether AGH has real long-term prospects is an open question. Emerging as a result of a split in the Hizbul Mujahideen, a predominantly Kashmiri militant group active in Jammu and Kashmir since 1990, AGH has been strongly critical of the Pakistani government, which fuels much of the militancy in Kashmir. Without Pakistani support, the group may find it struggles within the already crowded landscape of Kashmiri militancy.

Ideological Differences

Musa joined the Hizbul Mujahideen in 2013. A dropout engineering student, he rose through the ranks of the group. In July last year, he succeeded [Burhan Wani](#) as the group's commander in South Kashmir after Wani was shot dead by Indian security forces ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 2). However, Musa's views are more aligned with pan-Islamist jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) than with the Kashmir-centric and pro-Pakistan Hizbul Mujahideen, an official in India's Intelligence Bureau (IB) said. [1] Over the past year, his statements have laid bare the extent of his differences with the traditional ideological positions of Kashmiri political separatists and militants.

In a video released in March, rather than calling for Kashmiris to fight for freedom from India, he exhorted them to fight for the "supremacy of Islam so that sharia is enforced [there]." According to Musa, nationalism and democracy are forbidden by Islam ([Kashmir Monitor](#), March 15).

When the Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella grouping of pro-Pakistan Kashmiri separatist organizations, issued a statement describing the Kashmiri movement as a political movement and an indigenous struggle that had nothing to do with al-Qaeda and IS, Musa responded by describing “Kashmir’s war” as “an Islamic struggle” that was “only to enforce sharia.” He went on to warn Hurriyat leaders that they risked being beheaded if they continued to be a “thorn” and obstruct the formation of an Islamic state in Kashmir ([Hindustan Times](#), May 9; [Greater Kashmir](#), May 12).

The response from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, where the Hizbul Mujahideen leadership is based, was swift. The United Jihad Council, a conglomerate of pro-Pakistan militant organizations, dissociated itself from Musa’s statement and dismissed it as “unacceptable,” labeling it as his “personal opinion” rather than official policy.

On May 13, an angry Musa quit Hizbul Mujahideen ([The Hindu](#), May 13). Two days later, he released a video announcing his new group. It was not initially affiliated with al-Qaeda, although Musa said he was thankful to al-Qaeda for its efforts to promote sharia law. In July, however, Musa’s ties with al-Qaeda were confirmed when the jihadist group announced that he would head its new Kashmir unit ([FirstPost](#), May 15).

While ideological differences may have prompted Musa to part ways with Hizbul Mujahideen, the group’s quarrel with him was “not just about his attempts to Islamize the Kashmiri struggle,” according to an Indian intelligence source. [2] Kashmir’s moderate separatists and militants are not after all averse to the Islamization of their struggle. Slogans calling for Islamic rule were often raised at anti-India demonstrations in the early 1990s, even by the supposedly secular Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF).

The JKLF severely undermined Kashmir’s secular social fabric by unleashing terror and driving out the *Pandits* (Kashmiri Hindus) from the Kashmir Valley. Hizbul Mujahideen took this further by playing on communal differences and “Muslimizing the Valley,” as characterized by political analyst Navnita Chadha Behera. Indeed, the Hizbul Mujahideen and the Jamaat-i-Islami, a constituent of the Hurriyat Conference, altered the political discourse. As Behera writes: “The *Muslim Valley*, they intoned, was waging an *Islamic movement* against the

Hindu Indian state in order to accede to *Islamic Pakistan*. Islam, not Kashmiri nationalism, and accession to Pakistan, not an independent Kashmir, were now presented as solutions to the Kashmir question” (emphasis in original text). [3]

Criticism of Pakistan

Musa’s characterization of the Kashmiri struggle in Islamic terms is not new, nor are his calls for a pan-Islamic movement — prior to their joining the anti-India militancy in Kashmir and other parts of India, fighters of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, for instance, participated in jihadist struggles in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Bosnia and elsewhere ([The Hindu](#), December 12, 2009).

Kashmiri militant groups have also shown themselves willing to join hands with al-Qaeda. In 2014, Hizbul Mujahideen chief Syed Salahuddin announced that he was willing to take the help of “al-Qaeda, [the] Taliban or any other organization or country” ([India Today](#), July 15, 2014). Wani had also embraced the rhetoric of jihad and *khilafat* (caliphate) to mobilize Kashmiri youth ([Hindustan Times](#), August 26, 2015). But the Hizbul Mujahideen never reacted as strongly to Wani’s rhetoric as it has to Musa.

This may be because, unlike Wani, Musa has made no secret of his contempt for Pakistan. He has accused the Pakistani government of betraying the jihad in Kashmir, and he described its army as a “slave of America” ([YouTube](#), August 31). He has also forbidden Kashmiris from raising pro-Pakistan slogans or draping the bodies of slain militants with the Pakistani flag ([Times of India](#), July 13). This has drawn the ire of the Hizbul Mujahideen’s handlers in Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which see the move as an attempt to steer the Kashmir struggle away from Pakistan’s control. [4]

Some in India’s security establishment have interpreted Musa’s rise and the emergence of the AGH as a major security challenge with a hard-line Islamist outlook that may appeal to Kashmiris and draw more youth to take up arms against the Indian state ([Live Mint](#), May 31 and [FirstPost](#), July 29).

Evidence suggests, however, that many Kashmiris view AGH as harmful to the Kashmiri cause ([FirstPost](#), May 13). Since he split from the Hizbul Mujahideen and became chief of AGH, Musa’s relations with his former mili-

tant colleagues have worsened. The Hizbul Mujahideen accused him of being an Indian agent and of “helping Indian forces kill Kashmiris” ([Times of India](#), September 18). Indeed, one Hizbul Mujahideen cadre reportedly believed that it was due to a tip-off from Musa that police cornered and killed its commander, Sabzar Bhat ([India Today](#), May 30). Clashes between the two groups could increase in the coming months.

Musa’s split with the Hizbul Mujahideen comes at a time when the organization is under pressure. It has lost scores of leaders and fighters over the past year in encounters with the Indian security forces ([Rising Kashmir](#), June 3). Added to this is the U.S. listing of Salahuddin as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in June and the Hizbul Mujahideen as a foreign terrorist organization in August ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 28). The split following Musa’s exit from the Hizbul Mujahideen has further undermined the group.

Likely a Short-Lived Threat

AGH’s real impact on Kashmiri militancy is unclear. Counter-terrorism expert Ajai Sahni believes AGH will have “very little significance within the broader trajectory of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.” Additionally, some doubt Musa’s leadership abilities and his ideological commitment. He appears to be “ideologically confused” and has vacillated between commitments to al-Qaeda and IS. [5] Further, his links with global jihadist groups may be of little benefit to AGH, analysts say. Al-Qaeda “has been struggling to get a toehold in India for decades but has failed abysmally, and IS is in its death throes,” according to Sahni. [6]

Al-Qaeda does not have a logistical chain in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir that can feed AGH units operating in the Kashmir Valley. Without direct support from the Pakistani state and safe havens in Pakistan, the survival of any terrorist formation in Kashmir is unlikely ([Indian Express](#), July 28).

Musa’s espousal of a pan-Islamic ideology and his ties to al-Qaeda have rattled Kashmiris, the Hizbul Mujahideen and the Pakistani establishment. While AGH’s emergence is a reason for concern given its hard-line Islamist outlook, the chances of the outfit’s long-term survival are slim. The al-Qaeda brand name alone will not be enough to help it survive, and the group will find it difficult to compete without Pakistan’s logistical support.

*Dr. Sudha Ramachandran is an independent researcher and journalist based in Bangalore, India. She has written extensively on South Asian peace and conflict, political and security issues for *The Diplomat*, *Asia Times* and *Jamestown’s China Brief*.*

NOTES

[1] Author Interview with senior IB official (November 7).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Navnita Chadha Behera, “The Kashmir Conflict: Multiple Fault Lines,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, p. 44.

[4] IB official, n. 1.

[5] Author Interview with Ajai Sahni, executive director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Conflict Management (November 7).

[6] Ibid.

No Exit for Saudi Arabia: The Kingdom's War in Yemen

Michael Horton

It has been more than two and half years since Saudi Arabia began its war in Yemen. The campaign named "Operation Decisive Storm" was supposed to be a short, sharp operation to defeat — or at least cow — Yemen's Houthi rebels and reinstall its government in exile, but it has failed to achieve either of these objectives.

Yemen's impotent and largely discredited government continues its exile in Saudi Arabia, while the Houthis and their allies have retained control of northwest Yemen. The Saudi-led war has succeeded only in devastating a nation of 26 million and greatly empowering al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which wields growing influence in southern Yemen. Ironically, the Saudi-led war is the glue that keeps the alliance between the Houthis and their former enemy, Yemen's ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, together.

Apart from the extraordinary damage done to Yemen and its people, the war may well produce blowback that endangers Saudi Arabia and its ruling family.

History Repeats Itself?

Saudi Arabia and its primary collation partner, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are discovering what the Romans, Ottoman Turks and Egyptians before them learned from their own ill-conceived invasions: Yemen is an abyss for invaders. Yemen's cultural and physical geography defies and confounds foreign military forces. In their 1962-1967 invasion of North Yemen, the Egyptians deployed in excess of 50,000 soldiers, backed by armor and air force. Despite the overwhelming technical superiority of their forces, they lost at least 20,000 men and were forced to retreat.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia has committed few ground troops to Yemen. It, like the UAE, is largely reliant on mercenaries and proxy forces. Operation Decisive Storm relies on aerial bombardment, but that has achieved little in terms of degrading the military capabilities of the Houthis and their allies, which include many of the best trained units of the Yemeni Army.

A blockade of Yemen's ports and airspace is also a core part of the Saudi strategy ([al-Jazeera](#), November 9). Like its aerial campaign, the blockade has failed to diminish the martial capabilities of the Houthis and their allies. However, it has produced what is currently the world's most significant humanitarian crisis. More than 80 percent of Yemen's population is in urgent need of humanitarian aid, and an epidemic of cholera is raging across the country ([Middle East Eye](#), November 10).

Yemen has long been viewed as a problematic neighbor by the House of Saud. Saudi Arabia's autocratic rulers have long viewed Yemen's large and well-armed population, as well as its veneer of democracy, as threats. For years, the House of Saud pursued a careful policy in Yemen that preserved Saudi Arabia's influence—largely through cash payments to tribal and political leaders—and sought to ensure that Yemen remained stable yet weak. In March 2015, largely at the behest of now Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, years of covert—and at times masterful — manipulation were replaced with overt action in the form of Operation Decisive Storm. There is nothing decisive about the campaign, however, and the only storm is the one threatening Saudi Arabia itself. Having destabilized the country and set back Yemen's development by decades, the blowback from the war in Yemen may well have grave consequences for the House of Saud and the kingdom they rule.

Storm Clouds Over the Kingdom

Between 1962 and 1967, then-Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser's disastrous campaign in Yemen exacted a tremendous toll on his country's army and air force. Both morale and readiness within the military were compromised, and the Egyptian treasury was drained. Yemen is called Egypt's "Vietnam" for good reason. Furthermore, compelling evidence suggests that it's Yemen intervention led to Egypt's crushing defeat by Israel in the Six Day War (June 1967). [1]

Much like the Saudi and Emirati forces that are now engaged in Yemen, the performance of the Egyptian armed forces was closely watched by its rival, Israel. By comparison with Saudi and Emirati forces—including their many proxies—Egyptian forces were often tenacious in the face of withering Yemeni attacks and counter-attacks. Still, the weakness of Egyptian forces

was on full display in Yemen. The Egyptian military learned little from its war there, but its enemy, Israel, learned a great deal.

Now, Iran and its allies are learning about the weakness of their rivals in the same way. The Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) have largely proceeded from failure to failure in and out of Yemen. Not only has the RSLF failed to make any headway inside Yemen, it has also failed to secure Saudi Arabia's southern border with the country. Retaliatory cross-border attacks by Houthi and allied Yemeni army forces that reach deep into Saudi territory continue on a weekly basis. The under-performance of the lavishly funded and equipped RSLF mirrors its 2009-2010 defeat by Houthi fighters who, at that time, were few in number and poorly equipped.

Despite frequent claims to the contrary, the Houthis are far from being Iranian proxies, yet Iran undoubtedly has a relationship with some in their leadership. There are almost certainly information exchanges between the Houthis and various divisions within Iranian intelligence on, among other subjects, the tactics and performance of the Saudi and Emirati militaries.

Just as Israel learned about the Egyptian military's weaknesses and vulnerabilities, Iran is learning as much as it can about Saudi Arabia's vulnerabilities. At the same time, the Iranians are happy to sit back and watch the Saudis sink further into the abyss of an unwinnable war in Yemen, just as the Israelis were with the Egyptians.

Creating What They Fear Most

In a recent interview, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman said that the war in Yemen would continue because Saudi Arabia would not allow a "Hezbollah" on its southern border ([Majalla](#), November 3). The irony of this is that by continuing the war, the Saudis risk creating what they fear — an organization that evolves into a proto-state, like Hezbollah, with a formidable hybrid warfare capability. For now, the Houthis are not Iranian proxies nor are they directed by Hezbollah. Instead, the Houthis are a distinctly Yemeni group that is narrowly focused on nationalist concerns, namely defending the country against the two pronged threat of Saudi aggression and a resurgent al-Qaeda in the south. Of course their leadership is also determined to protect and, if

possible, expand their political influence and growing economic interests.

By continuing the war in Yemen, the Saudis ensure that the unlikely but pragmatic alliance between the Houthis and loyalists aligned with former president Saleh remains in place. It should be noted that Saleh waged six brutal wars against the Houthis before he resigned as president in the wake of popular protests in 2011. This alliance would likely fracture without the threat of Saudi aggression. At the very least, it would be reconfigured and the authority and influence of the Houthis, whose power base does not naturally extend beyond parts of three governorates in northwest Yemen, would be curtailed. [2] The Houthis' popularity in northwest Yemen, if one can call it that, derives mainly from their indubitable courage on the battlefield. Without a potent enemy, much of their *raison d'être* would dissipate.

The Saudi war in Yemen is not only helping to keep this unlikely alliance together, it is providing the ideal training ground for an already capable organization to perfect its hybrid warfare capabilities. The alliance between the Houthis and what are the best-trained and equipped parts of the Yemeni military — most of which remained loyal to Saleh and his sons — has allowed for a fertile crosspollination between conventional methods of warfare and guerrilla tactics. The Houthis were already masterful practitioners of guerrilla warfare, but now they have incorporated numerous field grade officers — many of whom have trained at Western and former Soviet staff colleges — into their ranks. These men bring with them an in-depth understanding of conventional tactics and heavy weapons systems.

This melding of conventional and guerrilla tactics is already evident on the battlefield where the Houthis and their allies utilize small units of highly mobile fighters backed up by equally mobile light and medium artillery forces. The small units and artillery forces coordinate their attacks by using a range of surveillance drones, most of which are re-engineered commercial versions or indigenously produced variants.

As the war in Yemen grinds on, it is likely that a somewhat limited relationship between the Houthis and Iran will develop, along with the Houthis' military capabilities. Iran can only be delighted by the fact that Saudi Arabia is mired in a war that it cannot win. There is little doubt Iran will want to prolong this at limited cost to

itself. After all, the Saudis and Israelis did the same thing to the Egyptians when the Egyptians invaded Yemen. Both countries, along with Iran, which was then governed by the Shah, aided and armed Yemen's royalist forces so that they could continue their fight against the Egyptian military. The strategy worked and Egyptian President Nasser's expansionist aims did not survive the war.

By continuing its war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia risks generating blowback just as profound as that experienced by Nasser 50 years ago. The Saudi effort in Yemen may well end up creating exactly what they fear — a Hezbollah-like organization that is capable and has deep societal and political roots.

No Exit

Muhammad bin Salman set out to show the region and the world that the Saudi military was a formidable force that could quickly rein in a group of rag-tag rebels. After months of unrelenting aerial bombardment, a devastating blockade and billions of dollars spent, Saudi Arabia and its allies have achieved none of their objectives. The Houthis and their allies show no signs of giving up the fight, al-Qaeda is resurgent across the south, millions of Yemenis are even more impoverished than they were, and at least 10,000 Yemenis have died in the war ([al-Jazeera](#), January 17). The only real beneficiary has been Iran.

Despite all of Saudi Arabia's bluster about the threat posed by Iran, its policies, at least in Yemen, have done nothing to mitigate that threat. On the contrary, continuing the war in Yemen may well enhance what is now limited Iranian influence there. Muhammad bin Salman clearly has no exit strategy for his country's involvement in Yemen and no means to secure his objectives. This does not portend well for the House of Saud, the people of Yemen or the region.

The current turmoil within the House of Saud cannot be separated from the country's failed efforts in Yemen. Muhammad bin Salman has much to prove and is not likely to back down, but the young prince could cost the House of Saud dearly in terms of blood and treasure. The Saudis should heeded the words of the Kingdom's founder, King Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, a man as calculating as he was cautious, who purportedly said on his

deathbed: "The good or evil for us will come from Yemen." [3]

Michael Horton is a Senior Analyst for Arabian Affairs at The Jamestown Foundation where he specializes on Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

NOTES

[1] See: Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power*, Princeton University Press (2015).

[2] See: Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, Oxford University Press (2017).

[3] Christopher Van Hollen, "North Yemen: A Dangerous Pentagonal Game," *Washington Quarterly* 5(3), 1982, p. 137.

How Malhama Tactical Threatens to Put China in its Crosshairs

Alessandro Arduino and Nodirbek Soliev

In early August 2017, Malhama Tactical, an unusual militant group operating in Syria and sometimes labelled the “Blackwater of jihad,” issued a statement in which it hinted at a planned expansion into China and alluded to the experiences of China’s Uighur population in the western Chinese province of Xinjiang.

The message is a departure from the group’s previous statements, which have been aimed at the Syrian government and its allies — Russia and Iran. It is likely only rhetoric, as the Malhama Tactical’s operations have so far been confined to the Syrian conflict, where its battle-hardened Chechen fighters have turned the training of young jihadists into a profitable business.

However, the group claims to have added Chinese fighters to its ranks. While for now its proposed expansion into Xinjiang appears fanciful, it is possible Malhama Tactical ultimately has bolder ambitions.

Jihadist Training Force

The Malhama Tactical group is run for profit and advertises itself on social media networks as the first jihadist private military training company. In January 2017, it even posted a job opening on Facebook for instructors with military experience interested in joining a “fun and friendly team” and who were willing to conduct “professional training sessions on military theory and practice” for inexperienced fighters.

The group is comprised of a dozen jihadist veterans from Russia’s Muslim republics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Tatarstan, as well as other former Soviet-countries such as Belarus and Uzbekistan, and some native Arabic-speaking fighters.

Online video clips posted by the group show professionally kitted-out mercenaries armed with AK-47s, Stayer AUG assault rifles and the ubiquitous rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs). In one film, the group addresses prospective jihadists in Russian, explaining

how to become a professional fighter for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra) and its allies fighting in Syria. This is complemented by well-produced video footage showing assaults against Syrian government loyalists, recorded in high-definition by commercial aerial drones and accompanied by a soundtrack of Arabic music.

In videos posted on YouTube, Facebook and VKontakte (a Russian equivalent to Facebook), Malhama Tactical claims to offer training in military tactics and weapons maintenance, as well as offering advice and analysis. It also provides online guides for insurgents on how to maintain and build weapons (Gazeta.ru, March 12).

Most of Malhama Tactical’s online training materials are in Russian, with only a few items in Arabic. The *modus operandi* of its publications is that of the Chechen guerrilla — in one online manual, prospective fighters are taught how to construct a “khattabka grenade,” a Chechen insurgent modification of the commonly used Russian grenade launcher cartridges.

Origins and Leadership

The group was founded in March 2016 by a 23-year-old ethnic Uzbek named Abu Rofiq. According to *Verdens Gang*, a Norwegian tabloid newspaper, he was born in Uzbekistan and moved to Russia as a young man, where he grew up in Moscow (Verdens Gang, January 18). He seems to have had military training — a Russian newspaper claimed he enlisted in the Russian army as a common soldier, or possibly a cook — though he appears to have later spent time in Russia’s elite Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska (VDV) or air-landing force (Gazeta.ru, March 12).

In August 2013, he travelled to Syria, where he joined Jamaat Saifullah ash-Shishani (a.k.a. Katiba Sayfullah), a Chechen militant unit that operated under the auspices of Jabhat al-Nusra. In 2014, he was appointed to run a training camp belonging to al-Qaeda in Aleppo and worked as an instructor for new recruits.

He led the Malhama Tactical until February 2017, when a Russian airstrike brought an end to his career. Abu Rofiq, his wife and infant son were all reportedly killed in Idlib on February 7 (Gazeta.ru, March 12).

The group has continued, however, under the leadership of Abu Salman Belarussi. His appointment was announced on the group's Twitter page on May 5. According to an online statement released by the group, Abu Salman Belarussi, like Abu Rofiq, is of military pedigree, having been a senior sergeant of the 103rd Guards Airborne Brigade of the Special Operations Forces of Belarus based in the Vitebsk Region.

Non-Aligned and For-Profit

The fact the group advertises itself as a professional training unit and not as an active fighting force has unleashed the ire of other militants. Islamic State (IS) supporters on various social media platforms frequently criticize Malhama Tactical's yearning for profits as a perversion of the true call for jihad. Complaints that Malhama Tactical deliberately avoids direct participation in the conflict are visible in comments and posts made by various IS supporters and fighters on Twitter, Facebook and other blogging websites.

Instead, Malhama Tactical has worked with a range of jihadist groups, despite avoiding pledging allegiance to any particular one. It has worked with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, the Chechen-led militant group Ajnad al-Kavkaz, which is fighting in Syria's Latakia province, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria and Ansorul Jihad, a Central Asian militant unit.

In February 2017, a video posted by Ansorul Jihad on YouTube featured scenes of the group's members conducting "joint tactical training" with the Malhama Tactical in northern Syria. Ansorul Jihad, founded by Abu Umayr Turkistani in 2016, is an independent militant unit in Syria fighting against the Syrian government forces, and its predominantly ethnic Uzbek and Central Asian fighters share cultural commonalities with members of Malhama Tactical.

The video featured a group of more than ten masked fighters practicing military tactical drills and undergoing weapons and physical training in a ruined building. The fighters performed exercises with small arms and grenades, as well as with the insurgent weapon of choice, the RPG.

Similarly in 2016, Malhama Tactical was involved in a number of major operations launched by Jaish al-Fatah and its other jihadist allies against Syrian government

forces in the north of Syria, including participating in the battle for the 1070 al-Hamdaniyah Housing Project in Aleppo in August 2016 ([al-Masdar News](#), February 7). It also took part in the battle in the east of Aleppo in the fall of 2016, which ended with the invasion of the Dahiya at al-Assad and Minyan districts ([al-Masdar News](#), February 7).

Malhama Tactical's main area of operations is in Syria's ravaged cities of Idlib and Aleppo. Throughout 2017, Malhama Tactical trained militants from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Ajnad al-Kavkaz and their affiliated groups in modern guerrilla warfare, advancing their capabilities against the Syrian military.

From May 2016 to May 2017, Malhama Tactical produced and posted about 37 instructional videos providing guidance on a wide range of military exercises, including on-battlefield medical response, target practice, military assault courses, the use of rocket-propelled grenades and ambush tactics.

Funding and Finance

Profit is supposedly Malhama Tactical's main motivation. Its direct income is from training fighters, but it also relies on online donations. The group has made numerous fund-raising appeals through Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube and Russian social-networking sites like VKontakte and Odnoklassniki (Classmates).

The group uses electronic online payment services for its crowd-funding calls, including platforms like Wallet One and QIWI Koshelek. It has even used crypto-currencies. In the past, when Abu Rofiq operated as a trainer for Jamaat Saifullah ash-Shishani (a.k.a. Katiba Sayfullah), he reportedly requested donations via QIWI Koshelek, a Russian online payment system ([RFE, September 26, 2015](#)).

In September 2015, Abu Rofiq made two separate appeals to raise donations to help the group purchase equipment and "assist those who are in need." He instructed would-be supporters to contact him privately for details on how to donate. Most recently, group members have begun crowd funding using the crypto currency Bitcoin ([Ria Fan, May 28](#)).

The online support base is growing with nearly 2,400 subscribers and 250,676 views on YouTube, as well as

600 members on its public Facebook page. On Twitter, the group has more than 1,500 followers. In January 2017, a member of Malhama Tactical used Twitter to call for anonymous donations and give an account number with Wallet One, a Johannesburg-registered international payment system.

While the group's online financial network is developing, local donations — even in the form of livestock — appear to be welcome. In November 2016, on its Twitter page, the group claimed to have received a sheep from an unnamed local Syrian as a token of his support.

Malhama's Expansion Plans: China

In March 2017, a video issued by the group indicated that Malhama Tactical's military strength is increasing. The videos showcased more than 30 militants in the group, an increase from the initial core unit of a dozen trainers. It also has fighters from Arab countries, Turkey, the Maldives and China.

Malhama Tactical has trained low-skilled Uighur fighters belonging to the Turkistan Islamic Party's division in the Levant (TIP-L) and participated alongside TIP-L in operations against the Syrian regime in southern Aleppo in September 2016 ([CSEF Russia](#), March 2). The group claims that not only Uighurs, but also Han Chinese are among its trainees.

In April 2017, the group published an online photo of two new fighters in its ranks. One of them, a trainer/translator who is a Mandarin Chinese speaker, was identified as "Yunus Kitaets" (Yunus from China).

The threat of a Malhama Tactical-led jihad to China seems fanciful at present. However, in its message published on Twitter in August, the group warned: "O our brothers in Turkistan [Xinjiang]! We have not forgotten about you. You are our beloved brothers. We promise that the help will come to you. Allah is with us. There is no blessing in those who, after all of these, say that the time of battles has not come. Now, the time of battles has come!" [1]

The ripples of Malhama Tactical's threat to Beijing are expanding from Syria to Xinjiang. If the group has the capacity to shape angry Uighur youth into elite fighters, then it is going to be able to threaten not only the Xin-

jiang Uighur Autonomous Region, but also the land corridors along Beijing's Belt and Road initiative.

There is perhaps some irony here as Blackwater founder Eric Prince has positioned himself as key to Beijing's effort to secure the Belt and Road initiative via his Hong Kong-registered private military company, Frontier Services Group.

Tackling the Threat

If Messrs Prince and Abu Rofiq have anything in common, it is the recognition of, and ability to, capitalize on the international private military security market. Malhama Tactical is a commercial enterprise — preventing future terrorist cells from benefiting from its capabilities starts with countering the group's financial support.

Tracing and following the money trail to Malhama Tactical is fundamental to preventing it from augmenting the capabilities of other militant threats. Also of paramount importance is countering the online narrative of "Boys' Own" adventurism in conflict zones that such groups promote.

Dr. Alessandro Arduino is co-director of the Security & Crisis Management Program at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences – UNITO.

Nodirbek Soliev is a senior analyst at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the RSIS-NTU in Singapore.

NOTES

[1] Author translation from the Russian.