

Terrorism Monitor

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BURKINA FASO: MALI MILITANTS CLAIM ATTACK

Alexander Sehmer

A Mali-based al-Qaeda alliance has claimed a number of attacks in neighboring Burkina Faso, a development that could foreshadow an alliance with local jihadists and promises a difficult year for the tiny West African nation.

Since its establishment early in 2017, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam Wal Muslimeen (JNIM), which unites a number of groups focused in Mali under the banner of al-Qaeda, has strengthened its operational capacity and extended the area of its operations. Amongst a number of announcements at the end of last year, it claimed to be behind a series of attacks, including two in Burkina Faso's Soum province—one on December 2, in Tounte, in which a Burkinabe military vehicle was destroyed, and an attack on a police station in Arbinda on December 21 ([Mali Web](#), December 29, 2017; [SITE](#), December 26, 2017).

These are not the first incidents in Burkina Faso for which the group has claimed responsibility, but attacks in Soum are typically attributed to Ansarul Islam, a Burkinabe jihadist organization established by radical local

preacher [Malam Ibrahim Dicko](#). Indeed, one report of the Arbinda attack claimed that gunmen who ransacked the police station left "Islamic State – Malam Dicko" written on a wall of the building ([Burkina Online](#), December 22, 2017; [InfoWakat](#), December 22, 2017).

Ansarul Islam, with its pretensions to be part of Islamic State (IS), has so far resisted throwing in its lot in with JNIM, but that could change going forward. Dicko is thought to have died in May last year, following an attack on his base by French troops. In his place, his younger sibling, Jaffa Dicko, appears to have taken over the group's leadership ([Le Monde Afrique](#), December 21, 2017). Like his brother, Jaffa Dicko has ties to Amadou Koufa, the Macina Libertion Front leader whose group is part of JNIM. The al-Qaeda alliance's Burkina Faso claims suggest a developing relationship between the two organizations, making an alliance of some sort possible in the future.

Burkina Faso is ill equipped to deal with such an increased security threat. The country's security minister, Simon Compaoré, has found himself publically embarrassed in recent weeks after being filmed wearing a bulletproof vest and waving a Kalashnikov rifle while at the home of opposition politician Ladji Coulibaly ([Afrique](#)

Sur 7, November 16, 2017). The incident took place several months ago, but the video, shared on social media, has left the security minister facing possible legal action (Le Faso, January 8). Meanwhile, unidentified gunmen again attacked a police station in Soum on January 5 (Burkina 24, January 6).

Compaoré's difficulties are merely a distraction, but one that Burkina Faso can hardly afford when faced with a burgeoning jihadist insurgency. Ansarul Islam's bloodiest attack remains the December 2016 assault on a military base in Nassoumbou—12 soldiers were killed in the attack—while its more recent attacks have been less spectacular. An alliance with JNIM this year could change that, however, leaving Burkina Faso looking set for a difficult year.

LEBANON: FEEDING THE FIGHT ACROSS THE BORDER

Alexander Sehmer

An Islamist militant leader has left Lebanon's Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp near the city of Sidon to join fighters in Syria, offering some small reprieve to residents in a camp that has several times been the scene of violence by extremist groups.

Palestinian militant Bilal Badr, the leader of the al-Shabab al-Muslim group, made his departure from Ain al-Hilweh public in a statement shared on social media at the beginning of the year (Daily Star [Lebanon], January 3). The statement was intended to thank supporters for helping his wife, who was briefly detained in the camp after he left, but in it he announced that he had traveled to Syria, "the land of jihad and glory" (Daily Star [Lebanon], January 2; Haaretz, January 2).

He is likely now in Idlib province, where Syrian government forces, backed by Russian air power, are attempting to recapture territory from insurgents, including the jihadist alliance Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, with which Badr's group has links.

Badr's al-Shabab al-Muslim, which includes some of the remaining members of Palestinian Islamist groups Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham, is one of a number of militant outfits operating in Ain al-Hilweh. It gained attention in August last year when its fighters clashed with Lebanese security forces and mainstream Palestinian organizations (al-Jazeera, August 23, 2017).

The largest of Lebanon's 12 refugee camps, Ain al-Hilweh is a hotspot for radicalization. Local Islamists have been connected to the attempted suicide bombing last January of a café in Beirut that was thwarted by the security services (Arab News, January 21, 2017; al-Arabiya, January 22, 2017). So too the hard-line cleric Ahmad al-Assir, imprisoned and sentenced to death in connection with attacks in 2013 on the military in Sidon, remains influential, even from his prison cell. Some of his followers have also left the camp in order to travel to Syria (Daily Star [Lebanon], December 29, 2017).

The cross-border traffic has been far from one-way, nor has it been, by any stretch, restricted to fighters. Swollen by those fleeing the Syrian conflict, Ain al-Hilweh's

population is thought to have grown from 70,000 to 120,000 people since the fighting started (MEMO, April 9, 2017). Such movement raises infiltration concerns, but security has grown tighter.

Party for Free Life in Kurdistan: The PKK's Iranian Wing Bides Its Time

James Brandon

In response to Iraqi Kurdistan's referendum on independence in early October, members of Iran's Kurdish minority—an estimated population of six to eight million people—held widespread public celebrations, including in the mainly Kurdish Iranian cities of Baneh, Mahabad and Sanandaj ([Kurdistan24](#), September 25). The Iranian government largely avoided a direct crackdown on this uncommon public demonstration of pan-Kurdish feeling, likely for fear of aggravating the situation. However, in a rare display of unity between President Hassan Rouhani and hardliners, Iran backed the Iraqi government's diplomatic and military move against Iraqi Kurdistan. This led to the Iraq army and IRGC-backed Shia militias rapidly recapturing most territories gained by Iraq's Kurds since 2003. Iraqi Kurdish leaders subsequently agreed to significant and humiliating curbs on their autonomy, dealing a dramatic blow to Kurdish separatist aspirations across the region, including in Iran. This action by Tehran—as intended—rapidly deflated Iranian Kurds, and pro-Kurdish demonstrations in Iran quickly tailed off.

These developments—in early January, the Kurdish demonstrations have since been followed by economically triggered protests in Persian areas of Iran that spread into Kurdish districts—reflect Tehran's enduring concern that Iranian Kurds, who make up around 10 percent of the country's population, could demand greater autonomy for themselves. Kurdish nationalism in Iran has in recent decades been subdued in comparison to Iraq, Syria and Turkey. This is partially due to demographics. Kurds in Iran represent a relatively smaller part of the total population, which mitigates against a successful insurgency.

However, some indicators suggest that, despite Tehran's recent success in containing Kurdish separatist feeling to date, Iran's Kurdish community may become more restive in the coming years. Key potential accelerants include rising Kurdish national feeling across the region, especially given the high-profile success of People's Protection Units (YPG) in carving out a self-governing re-

gion in northeastern Syria. Wider developments, such as the rise of social media activism—in Iranian Kurdistan, as elsewhere, this has allowed isolated activists to transcend national boundaries and evade the state’s attempts to control information—has given life to the formerly abstract idea of a transnational Kurdish identity. In this context, the recent trajectory of the largest and most capable Kurdish militant group in Iran, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), requires a detailed examination.

Structure

PJAK was founded in the mid-1990s as an independent student-led movement inside Iran. However, it is today part of the People's Congress of Kurdistan (Kongra-Gel). A purported umbrella group for regional Kurdish movements, Kongra-Gel is in practice dominated by the Turkish-Kurdish Kurdistan’s Workers Party (PKK). Like the PKK, PJAK is loyal to PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan’s Marxist-derived ideology, which it seeks to apply to the Iranian context.

Moreover, the group’s central platform is a call for “democratic self-administration,” which is derived from Ocalan’s principle of “democratic confederalism”—essentially a form of ethnic self-governance. The party also puts a strong emphasis on issues such as cultural rights, ecology and gender equality, and has a female co-chair; priorities like these have greatly helped its Syrian equivalent, the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD), gain significant international legitimacy in recent years.

PJAK therefore functions today as the PKK’s Iranian wing, although it includes non-Iranian Kurds and its Iranian personnel move between it and both the PKK and the YPG. Like other PKK groups, PJAK is also nominally divided between its military wing, the East Kurdistan Defense Forces (YRK), and its political wing, the East Kurdistan Democratic and Free Society (KODAR). The group likely has one or two thousand fighters, the majority of whom are in Syria and Iraq. As with other PKK branches, the group ostensibly seeks to work with all Iranians, but in practice its membership is almost exclusively Kurdish.

Militant Wing

The group’s military wing is based in the Mount Qandil area of Iraqi Kurdistan, close to the PKK’s camps there.

PJAK’s military arm conducted a sporadic low-level insurgent campaign in Iran from the early 2000s to 2011. This killed dozens of Iranian security force members, mainly in hit-and-run operations in and around Kurdish-majority towns such as Urmia and Mariwan, close to the mountainous and porous border with Iraqi Kurdistan. The group, however, declared a ceasefire in 2011, in part because its operations were showing no sign of producing results. Ironically, this occurred shortly before the Arab Spring, which, particularly as a result of the collapse of the Syrian state, created new opportunities for the PKK and its constituent groups.

As the Syrian civil war gained momentum, the PKK and PJAK began to send fighters to Syria. This was stepped up from 2014, as areas held by the YPG came under increased pressure from Free Syrian Army forces, backed by Turkey, and from Islamic State (IS) fighters, most notably at the siege of Kobane. Indications of this came from the YPG’s announcement of the death of Iranian Kurdish militant Raman Çalak in the Iraq-Syrian border town of Rebia in April 2015, followed by its announcement of the death of female fighter Leyla Eyranpur, from the Iranian city of Mariwan, at Kobane in June 2015. [1]

However, despite PJAK’s increasing involvement in Syria, the group nonetheless abandoned its ceasefire with Iran in 2015, largely in an attempt to capitalize on widespread outrage and protests over the death of a Kurdish woman at the hands of the Iranian security forces in Mahabad in May. This led to the group resuming attacks on Iranian troops, which triggered increased violence between PJAK and the Iranian government, peaking in August 2015 with a PJAK attack in Mariwan that reportedly killed 20 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The government responded by executing imprisoned Kurdish activists, including prominent prisoner Behrouz Alkhani ([EKurd.net](#); August 8, 2015; [Rudaw](#); August 27, 2015).

This heightened activity created fresh divisions between PJAK and its Iranian Kurdish rivals, such as the smaller militant-political group Komala, which warned in September 2015 that PJAK’s actions would give Tehran an excuse to “militarize” Kurdish areas ([EKurd](#), September 15, 2015). However, such complaints only highlighted PJAK’s militant credentials, which were already boosted by its association with the PKK and YPG. Since then, PJAK attacks have continued sporadically. In one of the most notable attacks, for instance, in early November,

the governor of Iran's West Azerbaijan province reported that PJAK fighters killed eight border guards near the Chaldoran border crossing with Turkey ([Press TV](#), November 3, 2017). The group has also sought to exploit anger at Iran's intervention against Iraqi Kurds. Likewise, it has tried to highlight the Iranian government's allegedly poor response to a series of earthquakes in Iranian Kurdistan, which PJAK's co-chair, Zilan Vejin, said was evidence of Iran not fulfilling its "humanitarian duties." [2]

Political Wing

Despite PJAK's insurgency, the group's political wing, KODAR, which is based in Europe and Iraq, and operates underground in Iran, has pursued a pragmatic approach toward Tehran. For instance, ahead of the 2017 Iranian elections, KODAR called for a boycott of the presidential vote, rejecting both the conservatives and the reformists. Strikingly, however, the group did not oppose Kurds voting in town and village elections in Kurdish majority regions, on the grounds that previously low Kurdish participation had led to power-hungry "Persians" winning such elections, and then enforcing central government demands in Kurdish areas. [3] The group therefore found itself in the position of tacitly recognizing the Islamic Republic's existence, and even the legitimacy of its elections.

Meanwhile, however, the group has used its militant wing to present itself as defending Iranian Kurds from the regime, notably in response to Iranian Kurdish anger at the security forces' harsh treatment of the "Kolbar," Kurdish smugglers who carry low-value goods across the mountainous Iran-Iraq border. For instance, when Iranian security forces killed two Kurdish "kolbari" on September 4, Iranian Kurds held largely spontaneous protests the same day in the cities of Baneh, Serdest and Mariwan—this event further illustrates the growing power of social media in the area. The following day, in response to the killings and in an attempt to capitalize on public anger, PJAK shot dead two Iranian troops near the border, in what they said was retaliation for the killings—the incident also shows the ability of the group's militants to strike rapidly when needed.

However, in September, in response to continued anger against Iran's treatment of the smugglers, PJAK publicly called on "Kurdish parliamentarians in Iran" to support the rights of these individuals. In this, KODAR's co-chair,

Fûad Bêrîtan, described the government's crackdown on the smugglers as a "political problem" that requires a "political solution." However, he also advised the smugglers to organize self-defense forces against the government, and warned that if Tehran did not respond on the issue, the Kurdish people have "other options," a reference to military force.

PJAK's response to the emotive kolbar issue shows how it seeks to use a combination of non-violent political pressure, including on Kurdish MPs in the Iranian parliament, and military force to win concessions for Iranian Kurds. It aims to enable itself to simultaneously position itself as the most vocal defender of Iranian Kurdish rights, and also as a relatively pragmatic political force that is even willing to somewhat recognize the Iranian parliament's legitimacy. This pragmatic approach likely reflects an assessment that waging a successful insurgency against Iran is all but impossible, and it is also intended to allow the group to win popular grassroots support that could facilitate a more extensive insurgency when conditions allow.

Future Strategy

PJAK's current strategy combines a number of elements. These include sustaining a low-level and persistent insurgency within Iran, with attacks linked to popular issues that allow the group to build grassroots support. At the same time, however, the group is to some extent willing to engage with Iran's political system, for instance attempting to pressure Kurdish MPs in the Iranian parliament and tactically encouraging greater Kurdish participation in local elections. Meanwhile, PJAK's deployment of significant forces in Syria to support the YPG is intended to support the PKK's wider regional strategy and to allow its fighters to gain military experience.

This suggests that the group is pursuing a long-term strategy, one likely predicated on gradually preparing the ground for a future insurgency while waiting for a suitable opportunity, such as the weakening of the central government. It is similar to the strategy of the PKK and YPG, which for decades avoided attempting an insurgency in Syria, but then moved swiftly and effectively to exploit the breakdown in governmental control there in 2012-4.

Since the outbreak of protests in Iran on December 28, 2017, PJAK's response has been muted. On December

31, the group issued its only statement on the demonstrations to date, noting cautiously that these “have the potential to lead to great changes. They could lead to a democratic transformation for the whole of Iran” (ANF, December 31, 2017).

It additionally argued that, although the protests were superficially economic, their root cause was political and that a “democratic solution” was needed. The statement concluded saying that “we are calling on the Kurdish people and all the peoples of Iran to the ranks of the struggle for freedom” (ANF, December 31, 2017). Although the restrained statement expressed support for the protests, it was far from a call to arms.

PJAK’s strategy to date suggests that it will continue to respond pragmatically to the Iranian protests, and to take a long-term view. This means that as long as the protests remain relatively small PJAK is highly unlikely to launch a significantly enhanced insurgency in response, not least because such an uprising would both be rapidly crushed and would risk unifying pro- and anti-regime Persians against this irredentist threat to Iran.

That said, the group is likely to respond to any regime attacks on Kurdish protesters with targeted and calibrated violence against state forces—as with its response to the Kolbar deaths—in an attempt to present itself as the guardian of Iranian Kurds. In the unlikely event that the protests do lead to a fundamental weakening of the regime, PJAK, backed by other PKK-linked groups, can be expected to rapidly throw its full resources into seeking to trigger a general uprising in Iranian Kurdistan—following the PYD’s example in Syria—with a view to establishing an autonomous region there.

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NOTES

[1] “Martyr Raman Calak”, YPG (April 24, 2015) <http://t.co/oykmOPdoLJ> and <http://twitter.com/dersi4m/status/615883839899107328>

[2] “PJAK Co-chair: Iran is in a dirty alliance against Kurds,” *Firat News Agency* (November 30, 2017)

[3] KODAR: “If the democratic developments does not in the Iran’s upcoming election, there will a major disas-

ter”, (April 2, 2017) <https://www.kodar.info/KODAR%3A-If-the-democratic-developments-does-not-in-the-Iran%E2%80%99s-upcoming-election%2C-there-will-a-major-disaster>

A One-Armed IS Warlord and the Problem of Militant Returnees in Georgia

Aleksandre Kvakhadze

On November 22, 2017, [Ahmed Chataev](#), the leader of a Russian-speaking faction of Islamic State (IS), was killed, along with two other militants, during a siege by Georgian special forces of an apartment block in Tbilisi. Following a 20-hour skirmish, according to Georgian officials, Chataev blew himself up rather than be captured ([Tabula](#), December 1, 2017).

The incident highlights an ongoing concern for Georgia—as IS has lost territory in Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters from Georgia and the North Caucasus are returning home. In what is a predominantly Christian country, the Georgian Muslim minority already faces challenges to integration. Now, returning militants are bringing with them the risk that local Muslim communities will be targeted for radicalization. More broadly, the presence of Caucasian militants has implications for European states and could also legitimize Russia's aspirations to bolster its soft and hard power influence over its small southern neighbor.

The Man With One Arm

Chataev began his jihadist training in the 1990s, joining the Chechen insurgency during the interwar period and training at a camp connected to the noted Saudi-born jihadist Amir Khattab ([Novaya Gazeta](#), June 4, 2016). He lost his arm while fighting in the Second Chechen War, earning him the nickname “Ahmed-one-arm.”

In 2003, Chataev was granted asylum in Austria. Although he was arrested multiple times between 2008 and 2011—in Sweden, Ukraine and Bulgaria—his refugee status prevented his extradition to Russia ([Kavkazskii Uzel](#), December 2, 2017). In 2010, Chataev moved to Georgia, where he married a local Kist woman and settled in the Pankisi Gorge, a Muslim region in the eastern part of the country. [1]

In August 2012, during fighting between Georgian armed forces and North Caucasian insurgents in the Lopota Gorge, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs

used Chataev as a negotiator to establish a dialogue with the fighters, or so he claimed. When shooting broke out, he was left severely wounded and lost his foot. A few days later, he was found in the forest and arrested for possession of explosives.

Despite being an important witness to the Lopota incident, he was released later that year and left Georgia ([Expert Club](#), November 15, 2012). Then, in February 2015, he resurfaced in Syria as a commander of Jamaat Yarmuq, an IS-aligned predominantly North Caucasian group that was involved in the siege of the Kurdish town of Kobani.

By then, Chataev was wanted by the United States, Russia and Turkey. Russian security officials believed he was responsible for recruiting militants and accused him of plotting terrorist attacks in Russia and Western Europe ([Kavkazskii Uzel](#), December 2, 2017). Meanwhile, Turkish media named him as the organizer behind the July 2016 Ataturk Airport suicide bombing, although Turkish officials never confirmed his involvement ([Yeni Safak](#), July 3, 2016; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 1, 2016).

Despite this, Chataev managed to sneak back into Georgia, presumably slipping past the Georgian security services. The more troubling alternative, which was suggested by opposition politician Givi Targamadze, is that Georgian officials allowed Chataev to return ([Tabula](#), December 1, 2017).

A New Path for Caucasian Jihad

Officials estimate that 50 Georgian citizens have fought for various jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq ([Civil Georgia](#), November 28, 2015). The majority are ethnic Kists, but Adjaran Georgians and Azerbaijanis are also among that number ([VoA](#), 18 January, 2016). Despite this relatively small number of fighters, at least four Georgian citizens have emerged as prominent field commanders, securing their place in the elite of global jihad ([Kavkazskii Uzel](#), December 11, 2017).

As the shootout at the Tbilisi apartment block where Chataev was killed demonstrates, the return of these militants has already commenced. Indeed, Chataev was not the first returning jihadist to gain media attention—in November 2015, IS militant David Borchashvili was

arrested upon his arrival at the Tbilisi airport (Tabula, November 23, 2015).

Returning jihadists not only pose an immediate threat to public safety in Georgia, but they are also well positioned to radicalize members of the local Muslim community. Political disenfranchisement and economic hardship have created fertile ground for recruitment and radicalization within Georgia's Muslim community. Meanwhile, the experience of the Soviet-Afghan War suggests that returning veterans of jihadist conflicts can increase the capabilities of domestic Islamist groups. [2]

The most immediate concern for security officials, however, is just how close Chataev came to achieving his objectives. Audio recordings recovered from his personal computer indicate that he intended to carry out terrorist attacks against diplomatic missions in Georgia and Turkey (State Security Service of Georgia, December 26, 2017).

Whatever the extent of Chataev's plans, there are potentially huge implications if an internationally focused jihadist cell can set up operations in Georgia. Centrally located, Georgia is a potential transit route for thousands of North Caucasian and Azerbaijani jihadists from the theater of war to European destinations. Simplified visa regimes with neighboring countries allow international militants to travel uninhibited, and Georgian jihadists could potentially benefit from a visa-liberalization scheme that permits Georgian citizens to visit European Union member states visa-free for up to 90 days.

Security Dilemma for Georgia

The clash in Tbilisi reveals fundamental weaknesses in Georgia's security apparatus. Despite Chataev's lengthy record, his group was able to infiltrate the country, rent an apartment in the capital and obtain weaponry sufficient to resist heavily armed security forces.

Further information emerged after five Pankisi Gorge residents accused of assisting Chataev's group were arrested on December 25 (State Security Service of Georgia, December 26, 2017). Georgian officials claimed that the militants had entered through the "green corridor"—the mountainous part of the Georgian-Turkish border used by North Caucasian militants and smugglers—and retrieved weapons hidden for them in the forest (Pirveli, December 5, 2017).

Incidents such as these reveal gaps in Georgia's border security. Mountainous, forested terrain makes the borders with Russia and Turkey porous and difficult to control, particularly in summer when the snow has cleared. Such conditions favorable to jihadists' movement heighten the risk of domestic terrorism. Indeed, the Georgian faction of IS has threatened attacks on local authorities and members of the moderate Muslim clergy (Jam News, November 24, 2015).

Furthermore, the transit of foreign fighters is a key element in Russia's diplomatic rhetoric toward Georgia. Russia's military doctrine allows Russian armed forces to launch operations abroad to protect Russian citizens. Therefore, the presence of Caucasian militants could serve as a pretext for further Russian involvement in Georgian national security and domestic policy. Russia could pressure Georgia to create a joint counterterrorism center, thereby legitimizing the presence of the Russian security apparatus in Georgia. [3] This would have the added advantage for Moscow of coming at a significantly lower cost in terms of resources and political capital than a military intervention.

The presence of Caucasian jihadists in Georgia is a complex issue for domestic and international security policy. The latest incidents indicate that the Georgian government can react effectively to immediate threats from militants—as they appeared to do in the showdown with Chataev—but it must work to build the capabilities necessary to anticipate and neutralize threats before they erupt into public shootouts.

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NOTES

[1] Kists are ethnic Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge.

[2] Cilluffo, F., Cozzens, J. and Ranstorp, M. (2010). *Foreign fighters*. Washington, DC: Homeland Security Policy Institute. p. 28

[3] A joint Russian-Georgian Counter-Terrorism Center was supposed to have been created in Georgia in return for the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Batumi

and Akhalkalaki, but plans were put on hold after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008.

Egypt Looks for Security Answers as Its War on Terrorism Moves to the Desert Oases

Andrew McGregor

The spread of the Islamist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula to the heavily populated Nile Delta and Nile Valley regions of Egypt has been facilitated by the importation of arms from Muammar Gaddafi's looted Libyan armories. Prior to Libya's 2011 revolution, arms and explosives were difficult to obtain. Since then, the growth of new Egyptian militant groups such as Liwaa al-Thawra (Revolution Brigade) and Harikat Souad Masr (Hasm – Arms of Egypt Movement) have been enabled by the availability of arms smuggled over 370 miles through the vast wastes of Egypt's Western Desert, the 263,000 square miles of which account for two-thirds of Egypt's land mass. With the Libyan-Egyptian border stretching for more than 650 miles, uncontrolled entry points to Egypt are plentiful, allowing militants and smugglers to move back and forth.

The Oases

The only centers of population in the Western Desert are the ancient oases of Siwa, Dakhla, Farafra, Bahariya and Kharga. Over time, the oases have been occupied by Ancient Egyptians, Romans, Mamluks and Ottomans. Modern influences only began to enter the oases with the construction of a road connecting them to the Nile valley in the 1970s. The mostly Muslim peoples of the oases are a mix of their original ancient inhabitants, Berbers, Arab Bedouin from Libya and migrants from the Nile Valley.

Despite their isolation, the recent battles fought in the oases between Islamist extremists and government forces are far from the first incidents of large-scale violence in these communities. The terrain of the Western Desert has been treacherous for military operations since the Persian King Cambyses lost an entire army to a sandstorm after it had been sent to destroy the Oracle of Amun in 55 BCE.

In the modern era, the oases only began to come under Egyptian government control in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1819, the Egyptian Viceroy Muhammad Ali

succeeded where Cambyses had failed by bringing Siwa under Egyptian control in a ruthless conquest in which he deployed Bashi Bazouks (ill-disciplined Ottoman irregulars), Bedouin fighters and a battery of artillery.

Conflict returned to the region during the First World War, when an Ottoman-allied expeditionary force entered the Western Desert from Libya. Commanded by Libyan Sanusi leader Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif and Egyptian defector and professional soldier Muhammad Salih al-Harb, the expedition was designed to sweep through the oases before inciting an anti-British rebellion in the Nile Valley. By March 1916, the Sanusis held all five major oases, but the rebellion failed to materialize. After a year of ever more difficult attempts to sustain an army in the desert, Ahmad al-Sharif returned to Libya with only 200 men, his reputation in tatters.

British officers in stripped-down Ford Model T's began intensive exploration of the desert in the postwar years. When war again descended on the region in 1939, their work provided the basis for successful anti-Axis operations by the Commonwealth's Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). In the years before the defeat of the Nazi's Field Marshal Rommel and his Afrika Korps, LRDG vehicles ranged the desert, discovering the routes that are now used by smugglers and arms traffickers.

Tensions rose in the region again after Gaddafi seized power in Libya in 1969. However, the colonel's attempts to incite revolutionary activity amongst the cross-border Awlad Ali Bedouins (with historic ties to Libya) were dashed by a four-day border war in 1977, in which Gaddafi discovered his small and amateurish army was no match for battle-tested Egyptian troops.

Egyptian Efforts to Control Arms Smuggling

The movement of arms from Libya to Egypt began during the short tenure of Egypt's President Muhammad Morsi, who was deposed by the army in July 2013. Security forces disrupted a major arms smuggling network, the so-called Madinat Nasr cell, in November 2012. The suspects claimed the arms were intended for Syria, but plans and documents found in their possession indicated the arms were to be used by the extremists to overthrow the government of Muhammad Morsi, whom they reviled for participating in democratic elections. [1] However, when an arms convoy was intercepted near Siwa Oasis in July 2013, it became clear that the prob-

lem was far from solved ([Mada Masr](#) [Cairo], October 22, 2017).

The Egypt-Libya border region is patrolled by the Egyptian Border Guards, a lightly armed paramilitary unit operating out of the western oases. The Egyptian armed forces do not have a counterpart to partner with on the Libyan side, although there are growing ties with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, commander of a largely Cyrenaican (eastern Libyan) militia coalition known as the Libyan National Army (LNA). Restoring security in Libya is key to ending the cross-border arms shipments, and Egypt has agreed to reorganize the LNA with the intention of molding it into a true national force ([Middle East Monitor](#), September 19, 2017).

Despite the efforts of the border guards and the Egyptian air force, shipments of Libyan arms (including advanced weapons) appeared to intensify in the last year:

- May 8 2017 – The Egyptian Army announced the destruction of a convoy of 15 vehicles carrying arms and ammunition across the Libyan border into Egypt ([Ahram Online](#), May 8, 2017).
- June 27, 2017 – An Egyptian army spokesman claimed 12 vehicles loaded with arms, ammunition and explosives had been destroyed during 12 hours of airstrikes near the Libyan border ([Reuters](#), June 27, 2017; [AFP](#), June 27, 2017; [New Arab](#), June 28, 2017).
- July 16, 2017 – Fifteen vehicles carrying explosives, weapons and ammunition were reported destroyed by the Egyptian air force ([Middle East Monitor](#), July 17, 2017).
- October 23, 2017 – The Egyptian air force reported the destruction of eight vehicles in the Western Desert carrying arms and ammunition ([Daily News Egypt](#), October 23, 2017).
- October 27, 2017 – The interior ministry recovered 13 bodies as well as weapons and suicide bomb belts after a raid on a training camp for militants at a farm on the highway from Asyut to the oasis of Kharga ([Reuters](#), October 27, 2017; [Daily News Egypt](#), October 28, 2017).
- October 31, 2017 – The Egyptian army reported the destruction of six 4x4 vehicles and the death of all

their occupants. The vehicles were reportedly carrying arms and other illegal materials ([Ahram Online](#) [Cairo], October 31, 2017). Earlier that day, Egyptian airstrikes targeting facilities of the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna, Libya killed at least 20 civilians ([Mada Masr](#) [Cairo], October 31, 2017). [2]

- November 11, 2017 - An army spokesman reported the destruction of 10 vehicles carrying arms and ammunition in the Western Desert ([Ahram Online](#), November 11, 2017; [Libya Herald](#), November 12, 2017).

In all, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi claims that Egypt has destroyed no less than 1,200 vehicles carrying arms, ammunition and fighters in the 30 months prior to November 2017 ([Xinhua](#), November 11, 2017). Though the list above may seem to indicate Egyptian success in controlling the border, the influx of modern weapons to Sinai and the Nile Valley suggests many arms convoys continue to get through the Egyptian defenses.

Controlling the border from the air without intelligence from the ground can lead to undesirable outcomes, particularly in a region that has become increasingly popular with tourists, who can now enjoy relatively safe excursions into the inhospitable desert thanks to 4x4 vehicles, satellite phones and GPS navigational equipment. From the air, there is little to distinguish tourist convoys from convoys of arms traffickers, as the Egyptian military discovered when one of their Apache attack helicopters mistakenly slaughtered 12 guides and Mexican tourists, despite their having a police escort, in September 2015. Authorities claimed the group of four vehicles was in an area near Bahariya oasis "off limits to foreign tourists," although a permit with a full itinerary had been obtained for travel in the region ([BBC](#), September 13, 2015; [PanAm Post](#), September 15, 2015).

Farafra Oasis

One of the most dangerous militants operating in the Western Desert is [Hisham 'Ali al-Ashmawy Musaad Ibrahim](#) (a.k.a. Abu Omar Al-Muhajir), a graduate of the Egyptian military academy and a former member of the elite Saiqa (Thunderbolt) commando unit. Al-Ashmawy is reported to have received advanced military training in the United States ([Egypt Today](#), October 21, 2017).

After 10 years' service in Sinai, Ashmawy was dismissed from the Egyptian army for Islamist activities and

promptly joined the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis terrorist group (which later became Islamic State's Sinai Province) in 2012, where he provided training in weapons and tactics.

In July 2014, al-Ashmawy led an attack on Egyptian border guards in the Western Desert's Farafra oasis. The assault was carried out by uniformed militants in four-wheel drive vehicles and armed with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and other weapons ([Egypt Today](#), November 28, 2017). The poor ground-air cooperation in the Egyptian military was again exposed when an injured officer was unable to call in air and ground support after the attackers broke off, allowing the militants to withdraw safely into the desert after killing 21 border guards ([Egypt Today](#), October 21, 2017). Wounded during the operation, al-Ashmawy was taken for treatment in the Libyan city of Derna, an Islamist stronghold where he had strong connections with the now defunct Ansar al-Sharia group ([Egypt Today](#), October 21, 2017).

Soon after the Farafra assault, Ashmawy split from Bayt al-Maqdis over the group's decision to pledge allegiance to Islamic State (IS). He appeared in a 2015 video under the name Abu Omar al-Muhajir to claim responsibility for the Farafra attack and to announce he was leading a new group, al-Murabitun (not to be confused with the Sahara/Sahel movement formerly led by Mokhar Belmokhtar).

In June 2016, militants struck again in Farafra, killing two officers and injuring three others ([Daily News Egypt](#), October 23, 2017).

Disaster at Bahariya Oasis

The desert's Islamist militants again displayed their military skills with the October 20, 2017 destruction of a column of Egyptian police. Working from air force intelligence that suggested a handful of militants were camped along the al-Wahat-al-Kharga-Assyut highway near the Bahariya oasis (85 miles southwest of Cairo), the Egyptian police sent to deal with them were working without air support and had only basic intelligence on the region ([al-Arabiya](#), October 21, 2017).

Instead of a handful of terrorists, the police column ran into an ambush carried out by a larger than expected force. Egyptian security sources told multiple media outlets that over 50 security officers had been killed before

the interior ministry issued a statement saying that only 16 had fallen with 15 militants killed ([Mada Masr](#) [Cairo], October 21, 2017). The ministry's statement was followed by government criticism of all domestic and international media that published the numbers provided by security sources.

The only militant to survive the Egyptian pursuit that followed was a Libyan veteran of the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna, Abd al-Rahim Muhammad Abdullah al-Mismariy. Al-Mismariy stated that he belonged to a group led by Imad al-Din Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Hamid (better known as Shaykh Hatim), another graduate of Egypt's military academy and a lieutenant of al-Ash-mawry ([Egypt Today](#), November 17, 2017; [Libya Herald](#), November 17, 2017). Shaykh Hatim, whose Ansar al-Islam group claimed responsibility for the Bahariya attack, was killed in retaliatory Egyptian airstrikes shortly after the attack ([Ahram Online](#), November 17, 2017; [al-Arabiya](#), November 3, 2017). According to al-Mismariy, Shaykh Hatim's group had been present in Bahariya oasis without detection since January 2017 ([Egypt Independent](#), November 17, 2017).

Military Shake-Up

The fallout from the Bahariya massacre hit the highest levels of the armed forces command structure. Army Chief-of-Staff Mahmud Ibrahim Hegazi was replaced by Lieutenant General Muhammad Farid Hegazi (no relation), a member of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that ruled Egypt after President Hosni Mubarak was deposed ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], October 29, 2017).

Also replaced were a number of high-ranking interior ministry officials, including the director of Egypt's National Security Agency (NSA, responsible for domestic intelligence), General Mahmoud Sharawi,; Giza security director Hisham al-Iraqi; General Ibrahim al-Masri, chief of the Giza NSA; and head of special operations for the Central Security Forces General Magdy Abu al-Khair ([MENA](#) [Cairo], October 28, 2017; [Daily News Egypt](#), October 29, 2017; [Ahram Online](#), January 18, 2017).

The disaster at Bahariya made it clear that lightly armed interior ministry units cannot deal effectively with better-armed militant groups directed by leaders with advanced training in military tactics. Poor intelligence and unfamiliarity with the desert by security units drawn from

the Delta or Nile Valley have hampered operations, while poor ground-to-air coordination has several times resulted in disaster. Nonetheless, Egypt's military planners continue to neglect improvements in their capabilities in the Western Desert in favor of massive investments in prestigious, but likely useless, items such as French amphibious assault ships and German submarines.

Meanwhile, the instability in the Western Desert has pulled Cairo into the Libyan conflict at a time when it is struggling to control the Sinai and tensions with Sudan are increasing over the disputed Halaib Triangle region and Egypt's alleged support for Darfuri rebels. Until improvements are made in Egypt's operational capacity in the Western Desert, extremists and arms smugglers will continue to fuel militant and terrorist activities in the Sinai and Egypt's main population centers.

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NOTES

[1] See Andrew McGregor, "The Face of Egypt's Next Revolution: The Madinat Nasr Cell," Jamestown Foundation Hot Issue, November 20, 2012: <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-the-face-of-egypts-next-revolution-the-madinat-nasr-cell/>

[2] The city of Derna, besieged by the LNA since 2015, appears to be the base for Egyptian extremists working out of Libya. Some of these have established bases in the vast Western Desert; according to Egypt's interior ministry, Amr Saad's Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate), a militant group responsible for a series of attacks on Copts in the Delta and Nile Valley, was trained in the southern regions of the Western Desert, near the Upper Egyptian governorates ([Mada Masr](#) [Cairo], October 22, 2017).