NIGERIA: DAPCHI ABDUCTIONS PUT GOVERNMENT UNDER PRESSURE

Alexander Sehmer

The recent abduction in Nigeria of more than 100 schoolgirls by militants likely linked to Islamic State (IS) has undercut the Nigerian government's claims that Boko Haram has been defeated, and is already playing into discussions about next year's presidential election.

Militants abducted 110 schoolgirls from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi, in the northeastern state of Yobe, on February 19 (NAN, February 25). The attack has provoked much anger, with some in Dapchi accusing security forces in the area of withdrawing ahead of the militants' arrival (Vanguard, March 2). Officials also unhelpfully and erroneously announced soon after the abduction that some of the girls had been rescued, and then cast doubt on whether they had been abducted at all (Vanguard, February 25).

President Muhammadu Buhari has since vowed his government will go to "any lengths" to ensure the girls are safely returned to their families (Twitter, February 26). Having heavily promoted his own efforts to crack down

on Boko Haram, however, the abduction makes him appear complacent and has brought back painful memories of the 2014 abduction of nearly 300 schoolgirls from rural Chibok, many of whom have never been returned to their families.

With Nigerians already talking about next year's presidential elections, the incident has become a hot-button political topic—Buhari's critics point to it as a security failure on the part of his government, while the president's faction contends the incident is being unfairly politicized and has even intimated that his opponents are "jubilating" over the kidnapping (Vanguard, March 4).

Thought to be behind the Dapchi attack is Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the IS-linked Boko Haram faction led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi (Daily Post, March 2). Another Boko Haram faction, led by al-Barnawi's rival Abubakar Shekau, has also been active, with Shekau releasing his first video in months in January (Daily Post, January 2). He has since released other shorter messages, seemingly in response to claims by the Nigerian military that his group has been defeated (Daily Post, February 4; Daily Post, February 8).

Meanwhile, suspected Boko Haram fighters have carried out a series of suicide bombings in Maiduguri, including one at a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Dalori ([Daily Post](), January 31; [Daily Trust](), February 1). The IDP camp is a frequent target for Boko Haram and suffered its worst attack in January 2016, when at least 86 people were killed.

President Buhari has had some success containing Boko Haram since taking office in May 2015, but the recent attacks make a mockery of his claims to have crushed the group. Instead, Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to be a menace, and their actions may well impact his chances should he, as is looking likely, run for office next year.

EGYPT: ISLAMISTS THREATEN VIOLENCE OVER ELECTION PERIOD

Alexander Sehmer

Egyptian forces have mounted a concerted military effort to tackle militant Islamists in the Sinai Peninsula, while the jihadists have threatened to violently disrupt Egypt's upcoming presidential election.

Egypt launched its so-called Sinai 2018 offensive on February 9, with the aim to "eliminate terrorist groups" ([SIS](), February 10; [Egypt Today](), February 10). By March, Egyptian armed forces were claiming that more than 100 jihadists had been killed ([ENCA](), March 4). Hundreds more people have been detained.

The operation, which has included air strikes and joint police and military raids on residential locations, is broader and more comprehensive than those that went before it ([Mada Masr](), February 9). That may be due to the appointment of Lieutenant General Mohamed Farid Hegazi, who was made chief-of-staff and tasked with tackling the jihadist threat in the aftermath of last November's bloody attack on al-Rawda Mosque, in which more than 300 people were killed.

For its part, the Islamic State (IS) presence in Egypt—IS Sinai Province—claims its fighters have been successfully repelling the military, carrying out attacks in Arish, Jabal al-Halal, Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid. A flurry of IS media releases since the campaign began have also mocked the Egyptian military effort, and vowed more attacks on security forces, Christians and tourists ([MEMRI](), February 19).

That leaves Egypt facing a difficult time as it moves toward the first round of a presidential election, to be held March 26-28. IS Sinai Province has threatened attacks on polling stations ([Mada Masr](), February 12). The smaller Islamist groups Liwa al-Thawra and the Hasm Movement, both recently blacklisted by the United States and United Kingdom as terrorist organizations, have also vowed to disrupt the elections ([MME](), February 4).

Al-Qaeda too appears to have called for violence, with the release of an undated recording of group's Egyptian-born leader Ayman al-Zawahiri calling for the Egyptian regime to be brought down ([Egyptian Streets](), February 17). In the last year, a number of affiliates of the group

have reasserted themselves in Egypt, including Ansar al-Islam in the Western Desert and Jund al-Islam, in North Sinai, both areas targeted in the Sinai operation.

Meanwhile, the man who ordered the campaign, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, is focusing his efforts on his re-election. In that respect, at least, he may have little to fear. After his opponents variously backed away from the race or were arrested, he faces only Mussa Mustapha Mussa, the relatively unknown leader of the liberal Ghad party (Daily Sabah, February 25), leaving al-Sisi as the favorite to win.

Adaptation and Response in the Hamas-Israel Conflict

Shahaf Rabi and Avery Plaw

In the early hours of January 14, the Israeli Air Force bombed a kilometer (km)-long Hamas tunnel connecting Israel, Egypt and the Gaza Strip, dug deep below the Kerem Shalom border crossing (Jerusalem Post, January 14). The tunnel stretched from Gaza across 180 meters of Israeli territory—including below strategic gas and diesel pipelines—into the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. [1] According to Israeli officials, it was intended not only for the smuggling of weapons and fighters into Gaza from Egypt, but also to permit simultaneous attacks on Israeli border facilities from multiple points (Jerusalem Post, January 15). This was one of six Gazan tunnels that Israel has destroyed since October (Jerusalem Post, February 19).

Israel is also now hard at work on a permanent solution—known as "the Obstacle"—to the cross-border tunnels (Jerusalem Post, January 14). The Obstacle's above-ground manifestation is a six-meter high wall, but below-ground there is a high-tech barrier of bentonite, concrete and "large iron cages" with a monitoring system and sensor equipment that detects tunnels (Jerusalem Post, February 22, 2017). [2] Only four of a planned 65 km has been built so far, but the Obstacle is due to be completed by the end of 2019. Once completed, it will entirely encircle Gaza, supposedly preventing future tunneling into Israel (Times of Israel, January 18).

Israel's anti-tunnel activities mark the latest round in an on-going struggle of strategic adaptation between Israel and Hamas (Jerusalem Post, January 15; Times of Israel, January 18). For as long as they have been in conflict, Israel and Hamas have been locked in a form of dialectic where one learns from the other. In essence, Hamas continually seeks to develop means to exploit Israeli vulnerabilities and, when it succeeds, Israel adapts its own capabilities, forcing Hamas to further innovate, which in turn instigates new Israeli responses. The pattern has been particularly clear since Israel's "disengagement" from Gaza in September 2005, but this pattern of adaptive learning requires closer analysis.

Taking to the Air

Prior to Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, armed conflicts with Hamas mainly involved conventional Israeli troops, and primarily revolved around the protection of Israeli settlements inside Gaza. With the settlements gone, however, Hamas no longer had Israeli targets inside Gaza it could attack. Moreover, Israel re-built an above-ground barrier around Gaza in 2000-2001, preventing cross-border attacks, such as the famous Fedayeen raids, and effectively neutralized Hamas' capability to carry out regular ground attacks ([Byman](), 2011).

Hamas responded by focusing its efforts on mortars and rockets. These weapons allowed it to circumvent the barricade around Gaza. [3] The weapons were cheap, relatively easy to produce and, Israel alleges, plentiful, as a result of Iranian help ([Ynet](), June 22, 2006; [Times of Israel](), April 13, 2015).

Consequently, Israel required public buildings in close proximity to Gaza to meet new standards of fortification capable of withstanding rocket impacts. Soon every newly built apartment in Israel, regardless of its proximity to Gaza, was required to install a safe-room ([Times of Israel](), November 28, 2012). Such measures limited the potential damage from rocket attacks, but they did not prevent the attacks.

In the spring of 2011, however, Israel responded more decisively by deploying its new Iron Dome system, and intercepted its first rocket ([Haaretz](), March 27, 2011; [Haaretz](), April 7, 2011). The Iron Dome is a proactive air-defense system designed to intercept projectiles fired from between four to 70 km away. It calculates the object's trajectory and, if it finds the object would hit a populated area, then it launches a missile to intercept it ([Jerusalem Post](), March 10, 2012).

The Iron Dome's value was amply demonstrated during Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012. One of the objectives of the operation was to dramatically diminish the ability of Hamas and other Gazan groups to manufacture and launch rockets and fire mortars. Because the Iron Dome considerably reduced the danger of lethal strikes on Israeli citizens, Israeli leadership had added leeway in choosing how to achieve its goals. Reluctant to risk soldiers' lives in a ground operation, Israel conducted the entire operation from the air,

attacking targets in Gaza until Hamas agreed to a cease-fire ([IAF](), November 21, 2012). [4]

Going Underground

Israel's air-superiority drove Hamas to develop its impressive network of tunnels underneath Gaza. This underground infrastructure was built for logistical and operational purposes, especially for times of intensive ground combat. In particular, it has played a key role in the kidnapping of soldiers during ground military campaigns. Yet tunnels were also soon used for carrying out attacks into Israel ([al-Monitor](), July 20, 2014). One such instance was the abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit on June 25, 2006. Israel's willingness to pay a high price for the return of its soldiers, or for the bodies of dead ones, provided a powerful incentive for Hamas fighters to seize them. Hamas held Shalit until October 11, 2011. In the exchange deal, the group enjoyed the credit for forcing the release of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails ([Daily News](), 9 October 2011).

Furthermore, tunnels have permitted surprise attacks and abductions during recent military campaigns, when Israeli forces entered Gaza. For example, during Operation Protective Edge, a tunnel inside Gaza was used to seize Lt. Hadar Goldin's body, and another Hamas (cross-border) tunnel was used to attack an outpost near the border, killing 11 soldiers ([Times of Israel](), August 3, 2014; [Times of Israel](), April 16, 2015). [5] Building each of those tunnels required Hamas to invest millions of dollars, but the network has proved to be of strategic value ([Times of Israel](), October 16, 2013; [Times of Israel](), January 18).

Israel was aware of the dangers posed by Hamas' tunnels, yet it initially struggled to take effective countermeasures. Cross-border tunnels were occasionally found, but until recently Israel had not developed an effective solution ([Ynet](), July 17, 2014; [Ynet](), August 27, 2014).

Future Developments

With Israel's construction of the Obstacle as a response to Hamas' underground cross-border attacks, Israeli security officials report that Hamas has begun working on a "drone army" and has renewed an old focus on attacks via the sea. In fact, Hamas has already established an amphibious commando unit. It launched an assault

on July 8, 2014, but its fighters were killed before they were able to leave the shoreline. [6] Moreover, when completed, the Obstacle is intended to reach into the sea in order to block similar assaults in the future (Times of Israel, January 18).

The real emerging threat that troubles Israeli security officials is that of drones, since there is to date no specific technological solution or physical barrier to decisively counter these small, agile machines. One possible strategic response would be further improvement of the Iron Dome, which has already proved capable of intercepting some primitive devices (Jerusalem Post, February 22, 2017). However, the economic and technological challenges to developing a general counter-drone capability are considerable. For the moment, the next move appears to be down to Hamas, which will be keen to find innovative means to significantly expand and upgrade its drone armada, even as Israel steps up efforts to interdict the transfer of the necessary technology and hardware into the enclave (Jerusalem Post, November 14, 2017).

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NOTES

[1] For visual simulation, see IDF on YouTube (January 14).

[2] Gaza is close to the sea so it is not too deep until sea-level water underground are reached. At that depth, the water makes it impossible for Hamas to dig tunnels so that is probably how the depth of the underground obstacle is determined.

[3] There were 510 mortar launch-sessions during 2001 (and no rocket fire), but by 2005 there were 860 attacks, consisting of a total of 1,255 mortars and rockets. By 2006, there were 1,275 attacks, consisting of 1,777 mortars and rockets. These attacks continued to escalate until 2009.

[4] Satisfied with the Iron Dome system, Israel equipped itself with ten Iron Dome batteries. See: Jerusalem Post (July 15, 2014).

[5] Hamas has also kidnapped Israelis in the West Bank. See: Ynet (August 23, 2014).

[6] For Israeli army footage of the incident, see: IDF on YouTube (July 8, 2014).

Houthi Missile Attacks and the Many Influences on Yemen's Conflict

Debalina Ghoshal

The conflict in Yemen took a dramatic turn in November 2017 when Houthi fighters launched a Burqan 2H long-range missile targeting Riyadh, the Saudi Arabian capital. The missile was intercepted before it could reach its target, but the Saudis, accusing Iran of supplying missiles to the Houthis, termed the attack an "act of war" by Iran (Haaretz, November 6, 2017). Nonetheless, the Houthis repeated the tactic in January, firing a ballistic missile, a Qaher2-M, toward Saudi Arabia's southern province of Narjan (The National, January 12,).

Saudi Arabia has seen several missile attacks from the Houthis in the past, though few have made media headlines. In fact, in 2015, Saudi Arabia's King Salman had already voiced his concern to then-Secretary of State John Kerry that Houthi Scuds might reach Mecca. That year the United States conducted a stop a search campaign on shipping in the Red Sea to try to prevent Iran from supplying the Houthis with surface-to-air missiles (The Times of Israel, April 13, 2015).

For its part, Iran strongly denies the Saudi allegation that it provides the missiles fired by Houthis (Haaretz, November 12, 2017). But the two countries are fighting a proxy war in Yemen and, Iranian influence is undeniable, though quite what control Iran really exerts over the Houthis is less clear.

Outside Influences

Iran backs Yemen's Houthi rebels, providing them with aid and weapons, including supplying anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, according to U.S. Vice Admiral Kevin M Donegan (Gulf News, September 19, 2017). U.S. General Joe Dunford, chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, has voiced concerns the Houthis could use the anti-ship cruise missiles to threaten commercial shipping along two crucial waterways—the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el Mandab (al Arabiya, June 18, 2017).

Houthi missiles fired at Saudi Arabia in 2015 were, according to reports, Scud-Cs that resembled the Hwasong-6 missiles of North Korea (al Arabiya, August 4, 2015). It could be that missiles from North Korea came into the Houthi's hands via Iran (Haaretz, January 19, 2017).

In September 2016, it was reported that the Houthis, who had taken control of the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, stole $4.6 billion from the central bank (al Arabiya, September 20, 2016). These funds could have been used to purchase Iranian weapon systems. Under sanctions, Iran would be keen to provide weapon systems to the Houthis through the black market for cash.

However, Iran is not the only foreign influence on the Houthis. Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemen-based expert on the crisis, has suggested that "countries like Oman and Russia currently have more direct leverage over the Houthis than Iran does." [1]

An economic slowdown in Oman has seen it commence trade with Iran and become a strategic ally. Although Muscat denies it, Oman is the most likely transit point for Iranian weapons, which have continued to reach the Houthis despite port blockades and airport closure (The New Arab, October 20; The New Arab, December 20).

Despite being part of the Gulf Cooperating Countries (GCC), Oman has recently chosen to act as a mediator in the Yemen crisis. Even though it is part of the Saudi-led alliance in Yemen, in early 2018 it issued a joint statement with Iran calling on Saudi Arabia to cease its Yemen offensive (AMN, January 9).

Moscow, meanwhile, would like to ensure a ceasefire in Yemen. It likely believes that such a move can enable Russia to gain influence in Yemen and help it establish a naval base in the country that will allow it some control over the Bab-el Mandeb Strait (Middle East Monitor, June 3, 2017).

In July 2017, Yemen's President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi appointed Ahmed Salem al-Wahishi as Yemen's ambassador to Russia, the first since 2011 and the fall from power of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (Russian International Affairs Council, December 14, 2017). In October 2017, a visit by Saudi's King Salman to Moscow gave rise to speculation that Russia could step in to influence Saudi to agree an end to the war (Gulf News, October 17, 2017).

Who Benefits?

Besides the short-term benefit to the Iranian military-industrial complex of supplying the Houthis, gaining an upper hand in Yemen could allow Iran to overcome Saudi influence in the region and tip the balance of power in its favor. Success in Yemen could see an Iranian military presence there, and Iran is already ascendant elsewhere in the region as a result of its successful interventions in Syria and Iraq.

In 2016, the Iranian chief of staff of the armed forces, General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri, clarified Iran's intentions and desires when he commented that "[i]t may become possible one day to have bases on the shores of Yemen or Syria." [2] However, the Houthis have shown little interest in fulfilling Iran's ambitions for them. In fact, in 2016, the Houthi political council chief Saleh al-Sama explained that "[n]ot one inch of Yemen's land or waters will be fortified to any foreign country … whether a friend or an enemy." [3] President Hadi, on the other hand, has thrown in his lot with the Saudis and has criticized Iranian backing for the Houthis.

But according to Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb, a former UK special forces commander, "Iran's involvement in Yemen is a part of a wider regional conflict [in the Middle East], one that Tehran hopes to win by overthrowing the old order and replacing it with one where Iran is better placed to dominate the region." [4]

Houthi Motives

The Houthis want to secure the interests of the Shia and the position of the Zaydis, who have been subjected to political and cultural discrimination (al Akhbar, September). Initially, they supported the ousted former President Saleh, but by the end of 2017 Saleh had broken ties with them, swapping sides to support the Saudi-led coalition (al-Jazeera, December 4). When the Houthis learned of this, they killed him (al-Jazeera, December 10).

The Houthis want influence in Yemen's politics and to that end have formed a national unity government aimed at securing the interests of the Shia Zaydis (Alwaght, December 1, 2016). They wish to manage the country's domestic affairs and bring development to their war-torn country.

However, neither Iran nor Russia are likely to allow the Houthis full control of Yemen. While Iran is equipping the Houthis with missile systems to defeat Saudi Arabia, it hopes to gain dominance for itself by using the Houthis as a proxy. Russia, meanwhile, has emerged as a powerful player in the Middle East and will also want its share of influence in Yemen. In fact, the Houthis may find that it is only with the support and cooperation of Iran or Russia that they will be able to bring about the development they want and manage Yemen's domestic affairs effectively.

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NOTES

[1] Al-Muslimi , Farea "Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive" (May 19, 2017) See: https://tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/

[2] Naveed Ahmad, "Iran's quest for foreign naval bases" (January 24, 2017) See: *https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/1/24/irans-quest-for-foreign-naval-bases*

[3] "Worth Dozens of Times More Than Nukes: Iran may seek naval bases in Syria and Yemen" (November 27, 2016) See: https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran-may-seek-naval-bases-in-syria-chief-of-staff-says-1.5466781

[4] Graeme Lamb, "The bloody battle in Yemen shows Iran is intent on dominating the Middle East" (September 2, 2016) See: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/02/the-bloody-battle-in-yemen-shows-iran-is-intent-on-dominion/

An Uncertain Year Ahead for the North Caucasus

Neil Hauer

Conflict in the North Caucasus has slowed significantly since 2014, and violence there has made few headlines, despite occasional significant events. Nevertheless, insurgent attacks and counterterrorist operations have continued, including in some areas that have been peaceful for years.

Total casualties resulting from violent conflict in 2017 were radically different from republic to republic in the North Caucasus. The number of deaths resulting from armed conflict fell by 73 percent in Dagestan (Caucasian Knot, January 15), with a similar decrease in the number of conflict incidents. Kabardino-Balkaria saw a massive reduction: 93 percent fewer victims of armed conflict in 2017 than in 2016, with only a single dead militant and no security personnel among the casualties (Caucasian Knot, January 14). Ingushetia, meanwhile, saw an increase of 26 percent in casualties from violence in 2017, with 10 violent incidents recorded that year compared to five in 2016 (Caucasian Knot, January 16). A major increase in violence was recorded in Chechnya, which saw an increase of 74 percent over the previous year (Caucasian Knot, January 15).

The major increase in casualties in Chechnya suggests there is potential for greater violence in Ramzan Kadyrov's republic this year. Examining the course of events over the last five months provides some clarity on what to expect from the region.

Looking Back to Look Forward

Last year, conflict continued at a fairly regular pace through October and November. Two alleged members of the armed underground were killed in Dagestan's Shamil district between October 10 and 12, during a counterterrorist operation (Caucasian Knot, October 12, 2017). A policeman in Kizlyar was also assassinated by militants (Caucasian Knot, September 30, 2017). In Ingushetia, an attacker stabbed three policemen at a checkpoint in the village of Yandare on October 19 before being shot dead (Caucasian Knot, October 19, 2017). Another checkpoint in Yandare was attacked on November 5 by four militants, opening with a suicide blast (Operations Line, November 5, 2017). In this incident, five policemen were wounded and one killed, while two militants were killed and two more escaped (Caucasus Voice, November 19, 2017). A checkpoint near the village of Roschi-Chu in Chechnya was later attacked by two militants, both of whom were killed, while one policeman was wounded (Caucasian Knot, November 19).

December 2017 in particular saw a significant escalation in violence. A special operation in the Dagestani village of Gubden on December 16 saw three militants killed (Caucasian Knot, December 17, 2017). Among the dead was 31-year-old Aligadzhi Khamutayev, who had been on the federal wanted list since 2012 and had allegedly led a raid on an interior ministry convoy that year, killing eight servicemen (TV Zvezda, December 17, 2017). Khamutayev had allegedly led local militants since his predecessor was killed in October 2016. Video of the incident shows federal counterterrorist forces storming the house in which Khamutayev and his associates had barricaded themselves (RT, December 17, 2017). Gubden and the surrounding region, Karabukhdent district, have continued to host violent incidents despite reduced conflict elsewhere in Dagestan, with nine militants killed there in July 2016 (Lenta, July 8, 2016).

More worrying was violence in two other republics, largely unused to such events. On December 9, regional security forces claimed to have killed three militants in central Stavropol city (Caucasian Knot, December 9, 2017). Two of the deceased were of Dagestani origin (Caucasian Knot, December 9, 2017). The fighters had allegedly planned to carry out attacks on New Year's Day, although the veracity of this claim could not be independently confirmed.

A counterterrorist operation was conducted in Karachay-Cherkessia on December 18, the first in the republic since December 2015 (Caucasian Knot, December 18, 2017). Security forces surrounded a group of militants in the southern Zelenchuksky district, killing all five gunmen, allegedly members of Islamic State (IS). A short video provided by the National Antiterrorism Committee provided little evidence of serious fighting beyond a handful of mortar strikes (Ren TV, December 18, 2017). Meanwhile, a fourth counter-terrorism operation (CTO) that week was conducted in the outskirts of Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, resulting in the death of

one militant on December 16 ([Caucasian Knot](), December 16, 2017).

The conduct of so many CTOs in such a short timeframe raises a number of questions. It could be that some militants were planning attacks on public places, as authorities claimed the previous winter when, in December 2016, they announced they had halted a number of terrorist attacks planned for New Year's Day in Moscow by destroying a group of militants based in the Dagestani city of Khasavyurt ([Ren TV](), December 29, 2016). There is little to corroborate this claim— however, security incidents in the Russian capital have been few and far between in recent years and other major cities outside the region are largely secure. The effective destruction of the Caucasus Emirate, the traditional jihadist insurgent vessel in the North Caucasus, has left would-be attackers with little means by which to rally resources and plan and execute such attacks (see [Eurasia Daily Monitor](), November 13, 2015).

One major piece of evidence points toward a more serious threat to Russia's two main cities. On December 17, news emerged that the CIA had shared intelligence with Russia that had helped thwart an attack on the Kazan Cathedral in Saint Petersburg ([BBC News](), December 17, 2017). Vladimir Putin thanked U.S. President Donald Trump in a phone call discussing the incident ([BBC News](), December 17, 2017).

Ahead of that call, a Dagestani and an Ingush man had been arrested on December 15, in connection with the alleged attack, alongside a Tajik citizen ([Caucasian Knot](), December 17, 2017). An official statement from the Russian Federal Security Service (the FSB) claimed that a seven-man IS cell was planning the attack ([FSB](), December 15, 2017). There is a precedent for a simple bombing attack in Russia's second city, as with the April 2016 Saint Petersburg metro bombing ([BBC News](), April 6, 2017). Nevertheless, experts remain skeptical as to what resources domestic terrorists have left to commit such attacks, with Dagestani analyst Akhmet Yarlykapov expressing particular skepticism. It remains difficult to judge the credibility of the thwarted attack in this instance ([Caucasian Knot](), 19 December, 2017).

Violence This Year

Several more violent incidents occurred in the first six weeks of 2018. Chechnya saw the first of these on Jan-

uary 3, when a local police chief in the village of Avtury was shot in the head ([Caucasian Knot](), January 3). Chechen security officials conducted a counterinsurgent operation in the village the next day and killed the alleged perpetrator and, in typically brutal fashion, dumped the body in the village's central square ([RBC](), January 4; [YouTube](), January 4). Later that week, a preacher in the Dagestani village of Mutsalaul was shot dead at his home ([Caucasian Knot](), January 7).

Few conflict events took place over the ensuing four weeks. A shootout in the coastal city of Kaspiysk in Dagestan on January 16 left one man dead after he opened fire on security officials ([Caucasian Knot](), January 16). Police later alleged the deceased had been an IS recruiter in the area, though this could not be confirmed ([Caucasian Knot](), January 16).

The next violent incident came on February 10, this time in Ali-Yurt, Ingushetia. Security forces engaged in a firefight with two armed militants, later revealed to be men of Dagestani origin with alleged IS links ([Caucasian Knot](), February 10). Interestingly, police footage revealed that the two men were unusually well equipped, with combat vests, grenades and suicide belts, resembling more the professionalized guerrillas prevalent in the 2000s than the poorly outfitted militants in civilian clothes more common in the North Caucasus today ([Guraba Media](), February 10).

The most significant incident, however, came in mid-February. On February 18, an attacker opened fire on Christian churchgoers as they left Sunday prayers in the town of Kizlyar, northern Dagestan, killing five women ([RBC](), February 18). The attacker himself was then shot dead by security forces. IS claimed the attack shortly thereafter, the first attack the group has claimed in the region in months ([SITE Intelligence Group](), February 18).

Following the incident, a video was discovered showing a masked man, presumably the attacker, pledging allegiance to IS, raising suspicions of a larger sleeper cell in the region ([Lenta](), February 18; [Kavkaz Realii](), February 19). That has sparked speculation that there could be a militant group headquartered in the Tarumovsky region of northern Dagestan ([MK](), February 18). As well as the pledge video, following an attack in October last year, two militants killed in the same area were found to have text messages congratulating each other on the successful killing of a Kizlyar policemen shortly beforehand.

Given the existence of a similar IS-linked group in Khasavyurt, not far west of Kizlyar, in late 2016, it is plausible that there is an IS cell presently based in the Tarumovsky region (see Terrorism Monitor, February 10, 2017).

Trouble in Chechnya

Out of all the republics of the North Caucasus, Chechnya seems most likely to present prospects for greater violence in 2018. Authorities have recently stepped up levels of repression, extending a major crackdown on human rights activists in the republic. On January 11, Chechen security services arrested Oyub Titiev, the head of the Memorial rights organization in Chechnya, detaining him on fabricated charges of drug possession (Amnesty International, January 11, 2018). Chechen security forces then burned down Memorial's office in Ingushetia on January 17, before burning a Memorial member's car in Makhachkala, Dagestan and sending him a text message stating "next time you will burn with it" (RFE/RL, January 17, 2018; Katya Sokirianskaia, January 23, 2018). Titiev has since been kept in detention at an unknown location, appearing only once in court, while his house in the town of Kurchaloy has been slated for destruction as part of a plan to build a shopping center (Deutsche Welle, February 9).

While such a crackdown does not necessarily portend violence on its own, it contributes to a sense of deep anger within Chechen society toward the leadership. Chechnya is currently the largest non-warzone source of refugees attempting to enter the European Union (EU). Up to 100 Chechens attempt to cross the border from Belarus into Poland every single day, fleeing arbitrary arrest, torture and collective punishment in their homeland (Open Democracy Russia, November 23, 2017).

While insurgent networks have been essentially destroyed in Chechnya, the brutality of the security forces and their treatment of the civilian population is leading to an increase in ad hoc attacks, where small groups of unorganized young men open fire on government militiamen, apparently spontaneously. These attacks are difficult to predict or prevent, and seem set to continue.

Locals have been incensed by Chechen leader Kadyrov's thuggish behavior, often seen as at odds with Chechen values. The visit of Ksenia Sobchak, a candidate for Russia's March 2018 presidential election, to Grozny on January 28 was one such incident. Kadyrov had ordered all businesses closed in the city center that day (Independent, January 28, 2018). When Sobchak visited a lone espresso cart, she was confronted by a group of burly young men, one of whom asked her "Why are you drinking coffee? It's bad for horses," and told her to leave as "my home is no place for you."

The reception on Chechen social media was furious, with one popular post stating: "I am no fan of Sobchak, but this incident deeply offends me as a Chechen (Facebook, January 29). When did we *Vainakh* (the collective name for the closely-related Chechen and Ingush peoples) begin to treat guests this way, and especially women?" Such comments embody the views of many in the republic toward Kadyrov's brazen, antagonistic leadership. As one refugee in Belarus chillingly put it: "[R]ight after Putin resigns, our people will eliminate Kadyrov. They're waiting for it. They have gathered together like bees in a beehive and they are at the limit of their patience" (Open Democracy Russia, November 23, 2017).

Ones to Watch

Several thousand North Caucasians joined IS as foreign fighters and, with the group's loss of its territory, it is possible that North Caucasian returnees from Syria and Iraq could begin to impact the region. To date, however, there has been no proven link between the attacks in the North Caucasus and returnees from Syria or Iraq. A detailed study found that, of several dozen confirmed returnees, none had played a role in the recent attacks (CREST, November 20, 2017). Nevertheless, a disconcerting incident occurred on November 22 in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Security forces blockaded three militants in a building in the city's Isani district, killing all three in a lengthy siege (a policeman also died)(DF Watch, November 22, 2017).

One of the dead was revealed to be Akhmed Chatayev, the notorious one-armed IS commander who allegedly masterminded the 2016 Istanbul airport bombing (DF Watch, December 23, 2017; see Terrorism Monitor, January 15). Chatayev had apparently crossed into Georgia with the aid of local allies and hid in an apartment owned by an acquaintance. Following this event, Georgian security services conducted an operation in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, inhabited by ethnic Chechens, in which a local 19-year-old was shot and eventually died

in hospital ([JAM News](#), January 11). Authorities claimed he had been holding a grenade and was part of the network that had helped Chatayev—locals denied this. In late January, the mayor of Grozny then visited Tbilisi and Batumi on an unannounced visit discovered by Georgian media ([EurasiaNet](#), January 24). While the meaning of the visit was unclear, it seems likely to have been connected to the events surrounding Chatayev and the Chechen government's desire to monitor any possible return of militants from the Middle East ([Rustavi-2](#), February 10).

It seems 2018 could go in either direction for the North Caucasus. Events may remain quiet, as seems the case in Kabardino-Balkaria. Ingushetia is somewhat more volatile, as demonstrated by the late 2017 checkpoint attacks, but will likely also remain quiet. Dagestan and Chechnya, however, are of greater concern.

Dagestan's drop in violence is uncharacteristic. The existence of the cell near Tarumovsky and potential turmoil owing to political upheaval as new head Vladimir Vasiliev carries out wide-ranging reforms likely portends an increase in violence from 2017. Chechnya in particular has the potential for insurgent attacks on a wider and more unpredictable scale. As Kadyrov continues his crackdown and socioeconomic prospects worsen for locals, it is highly likely that random attacks on security forces will increase.

The events around the deceased militant Chatayev also portend potential further moves by North Caucasian militants to attempt to return to the region from Syria and Iraq, a trend which could have unpredictable results. All these factors bear watching as the North Caucasus continues further into 2018.

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