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WESTERN SAHARA: ALGERIA PLANE CRASH HIGHLIGHTS TENSIONS

Alexander Sehmer

A plane crash in Algeria that left more than 200 people dead and prompted three days of national mourning has unexpectedly thrown a spotlight on tensions over Western Sahara.

As many as 257 people were killed when an Algerian military plane crashed shortly after take-off in Boufarik, a town in northern Blida Province just 20 miles southwest of the capital Algiers (APS, April 11; France 24, April 11). Although most of the dead were members of the military, several of those killed were reported to be members of the Polisaro Front, the Western Sahara independence movement that is locked in a dispute with Morocco (al-Jazeera, April 11; TSA, April 12).

A Polisario statement insisted that 30 Western Saharan refugees were killed in the crash (Anadlou Agency, April 11; al-Arabiya, April 12). They had been returning, the Polisario said, having received medical treatment, to Tindouf, the southern Algerian province that is home to Polisario-run refugee camps. Moroccan media remained skeptical, publishing a list of supposed Polisario members killed in the crash (Morocco World News, April 11).

Ahmed Ouyahia, Algeria's prime minister, accused the Moroccan media of spreading rumors, pointing out that thousands of Western Saharan refugees live in Algeria (APS, April 14). But such speculation is not unfounded, coming as it does at a time of increased tensions between the Polisario and Morocco.

In recent weeks, Morocco has accused the Polisario of orchestrating a military build up in the town of Mahbes, in contravention of a ceasefire agreement that established a buffer zone between the two sides (al-Jazeera, April 2). Rabat is rumored to have warned Algiers that it is contemplating military intervention over the issue, and is reportedly preparing to recall aircraft it has committed to the Saudi-led collation in Yemen for such an eventuality (al-Bawaba, April 15).

Geopolitical developments are also playing a factor as Russia continues a gradual tilt away from Morocco's position on Western Sahara and toward that of the Polisario, in the hope of displacing European influence in the region (see Eurasia Daily Monitor, April 17).

Algeria protests that it should not be dragged into a conflict between the Polisario and Morocco (APS, April 14). It has, however, backed the Polisario since the mid-1970s, sheltering the group in exile after Moroccan and Mauritanian forces marched into the Saharan territory that colonial power Spain was at that point rapidly vacating.

Since 1991, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) has sat between the two sides, making only limited progress—accused of overreach by Morocco, and by the Polisario of not doing nearly enough. The mission is due to have its mandate renewed at the end of this month.

Tensions over towns in the buffer zone are not uncommon. In that context, Moroccan troop movements are less alarming, even in the light of Moscow's fickle favor. The lack of progress on any settlement is the source of frequently frustration in the camps in Tindouf, but the ceasefire has weathered such storms before.

NIGER: JIHADISTS PLAY ON LOCAL GRIEVANCES

Alexander Sehmer

The abduction of an aid worker in Niger highlights insecurity in the country's northwest, near the border with Mali, a situation that is unlikely to be tackled by military might alone.

Suspected jihadists abducted a German aid worker in Ayorou, part of Niger's troubled Tillaberi region, about 120 miles northwest of the capital of Niamey, on April 11. According to reports, he and four Nigerien colleagues were ambushed by eight gunmen on motorcycles, who left the Nigeriens tied up and blindfolded, before setting fire to the vehicle in which the group had been travelling and escaping across the border to Mali (ActuNiger, April 11).

Western aid workers in the region are targets for jihadists—in 2016, gunmen in Niger abducted the U.S. aid worker Jeffery Woodke, whose fate remains unknown—but at the time of writing, no group had claimed to be behind the recent abduction. Niger's Tahoua and Tillaberi regions are a focus of militant activity, however, and a number of jihadist groups operate there, among them the al-Qaeda alliance of Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam Wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Led by Adnan Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi, a former spokesman for the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), ISGS is a particular menace to Niger. The group was likely responsible for the ambush in Tongo Tongo in October last year in which four U.S. troops were killed, along with five Nigerien soldiers (al-Jazeera, October 5, 2017; Africa News, January 14). It was also behind an attack in February that year on a Nigerien military patrol, in which militants killed as many as 17 Nigerien troops (RFI, February 23, 2017; Afrique Sur 7, February 23, 2017; Journal du Mali, February 23, 2017). A thwarted 2016 attack on the Koutoukalé prison outside Niamey has also been attributed to the group (Africa News, October 17, 2016).

As a MUJAO commander, al-Sahrawi specifically threatened Niger over its cooperation with France in anti-terrorism efforts (al-Jazeera, May 24, 2013). And while he appears to descend from the Sahrawi people, he has managed to secure a following among the ethnic Fulani

(or Peul) in the Mali-Niger border area by tapping into local grievances. Local nomadic herdsmen, the Fulani among them, are left to fend off cattle raiders and complain of government repression, often under the guise of counter-terrorism operations. Al-Sharawi's relatively small jihadist group offers them some protection. Doundou Chefou, the suspected leader of the Tongo Tongo ambush, is an ethnic Fulani.

At the beginning of the year, Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou pledged to strengthen his country's security forces to fend off the growing jihadist threat (Afrique Sur 7, January 2). That may help to address the continued instability in the Niger-Mali border region, but it will need to be combined with efforts to address local grievances and promote development.

Jaysh al-Ayman: A 'Local' Threat in Kenya

Sunguta West

After a series of deadly attacks, Jaysh al-Ayman, an elite al-Shabaab unit formed about five years ago to carry out operations inside Kenya, has emerged as the deadliest terrorist cell in the East African nation. Although it started life in Somalia, the al-Qaeda affiliate's Kenya wing portrays itself as a local movement and has set up bases in the Boni forest, an expanse of woodland in Kenya's coastal Lamu County, which extends to the border with Somalia. It is from here the faction terrorizes villages and towns, and targets the police, the military and other government institutions (Daily Nation, August 22, 2017).

The faction is named after one of its top leaders, Maalim Ayman (a.k.a. Dobow Abdiaziz Ali), an ethnic Somali from Mandera County. [1] He was likely appointed to the role in the hope that having a Kenyan in charge of what is effectively al-Shabaab's Kenya wing would ease tensions. Details about Ayman are scarce, and his current role within the group is unclear. According to some reports, however, he continues to train the group's fighters in wilderness survival techniques (The Star, July 13, 2015).

A Bloody Beginning

The unit's origins can be traced to the events on June 20, 2013, in Barawi, an ancient Somali coastal town, where differences within al-Shabaab boiled over. Barawi had become al-Shabaab's operational headquarters after it was forced out of the port of Kismayu by the Kenyan military—Kismayu had served as group's headquarters since it was established in 2006 (The Standard, July 23, 2017). On June 20, Ahmed Abdi Godane, then al-Shabaab's emir, was concerned that members of the group's shura council were accusing him of adopting a murderous strategy that targeted civilians and were preparing to split away from the group.

Two years prior, in 2011, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) had been strengthened by Kenyan troops. Concerned with how to keep his group intact in the face of an onslaught by a better-armed foe and desperate to reassert his authority, Godane ordered the Amniyat, the group's elite spy wing, to execute Ibrahim

al-Afghani, a member of al-Shabaab's shura council. Other shura members, among them Mukhtar Robow and Shaykh Dahir Aweys, were also targeted, but escaped and later defected to the Somali government.

In late 2013, following a strategy aimed at fighting a more effective asymmetrical war in Somalia and its neighbors, Godane unveiled two new wings of al-Shabaab—Jaysh al- Usra, which he directed at Ethiopia, and Jaysh al-Ayman, which would target Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania (The Reporter, August 20, 2016).

While Jaysh al-Usra failed to penetrate Ethiopia, Jaysh al-Ayman has seen success in Kenya. So much so, in fact, that although Kenyan security agencies launched the Operation Linda Boni (Operation "Protect Boni") in 2015 to flush the militants out of the forest, it has met with only limited success. The group has become a major headache for the Kenyan security services. Experts now question whether intelligence reports were ignored early on, allowing the group to securely embed itself in the area (Daily Nation, July 20, 2017).

Attacks in Kenya

Jaysh al-Ayman has played a leading role in many of the recent major terrorist attacks in Kenya. Abdilatif Abubakar Ali, a commander with the group, is believed to have played a key role in planning and executing the 2013 Westgate Shopping Mall attack, which left 67 people dead (The Star, December 2, 2015). In June 2014, 50 heavily armed militants targeted the Mpeketoni area, killing 48 people, all non-Muslims, and killed another 29 in Hindi area, two weeks later. In June 2014, the militants descended on Lamu County, massacring nearly 100 people Daily Nation, June 16, 2014; Standard Digital, June 17, 2014).

In neighboring Pandanguo, another town in Lamu, the militants carried out a different type of operation, putting away their guns and instead, since the area is predominantly Muslim, hoarding people into a mosque and preaching to them, before looting drugs, nets and mattresses from a nearby dispensary (The Standard, July 11, 2014; The Standard, July 23, 2017). In April 2015, al-Shabaab gunmen, who security experts say were linked to the faction, stormed Garissa University, killing 148 people, mainly Christian students, in the most deadly attack in Kenya since the 1998 Nairobi U.S. embassy bombing by al-Qaeda, in which more than 200 people were killed.

More recently, the faction was linked to the kidnapping of the late Mariam El-Maawy, a top Kenyan government official who was abducted by militants along the Mokowe-Mpeketoni road. El-Maawy was rescued by the Kenyan military and taken for treatment in South Africa, but died of her wounds in hospital three months later (The Standard, September 28, 2017).

Aside from these bloody, high-profile attacks, the group has planted Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) along parts of the lengthy and porous Kenya-Somali border and has killed numerous civilians, policemen and soldiers.

Expanding Membership

Initially, Kenyans from the coastal region made-up the majority of Jaysh al-Ayman'. One of Jaysh al-Ayman's key commanders is Abdifatah Abubakar Abdi (a.k.a. Musa Muhajir), a Kenyan from the coast city of Mombasa (see Militant Leadership Monitor, April 4). Muhajir has been on the radar of the Kenyan security services for some time, and the police say he is one of the militants responsible for the Lamu attacks (Daily Nation, July 16, 2017; Daily Nation, March 4, 2015).

In recent years, the group has grown to include Muslim converts from some of Kenya's non-Muslim communities, as well as foreign fighters (The Standard, July 23, 2017). Among the foreign jihadists known to have joined the group was Malik Ali Jones, an American currently in jail in the United States. Another key foreign fighter is Ahmed Muller, a German citizen who uses several aliases, including Andreas Ahmad Khaled, Muller Martin Muller and Abu Nusaibah. The 42-year-old militant, who comes from Cochem, Germany, was allegedly seconded to al-Shabaab by its al-Qaeda affiliate in Pakistan in 2011 (Daily Nation, June 19, 2015; Citizen TV, June 20, 2015).

Jones and Muller were identified after the killing of a British national, Thomas Evans, during an attempted attack on an army camp in the Buare area. In that failed attack, more than 10 al-Shabaab militants were killed while score of others fled with serious injuries. The group's commander, Issa Luqman Osman (a.k.a. "Shirwa"), was also killed. Although there are indications that

a new leader has since emerged, it remains unclear exactly who has replaced him (The Standard, June 17, 2015). Following the attack, the government released photographs of 38 militants believed to have taken part, including one of Muller.

Despite the efforts of the Kenyan security services, Jaysh al-Ayman continues to menace Kenyans in the Boni forest, and that threat appears set to grow more potent. In a recent al-Shabaab video, the group's spokesman Sheikh Ali Mahmoud Rage is seen speaking to foreign fighters graduating after attending a training camp in southern Somalia. In his speech, he calls on the Kenyan fighters among their ranks to become an "army" to "conquer" Somalia's neighbor.

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NOTES

[1] There are several variations of the group's names, often simply alternative spellings. It is variously referred to as: Jeysh Ayman, Jaysh Ayman, Jaysh Ayman al-Shabaab, Jaysh la Imani or Jaysh Ayman Majmo Ayman.

Tackling the Roots of Uzbek Terror

Dana E Abizaid

Uzbek nationals have carried out five major terrorist attacks across Europe and the United States since 2016, the most devastating of which occurred at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport, in June 2016, and the city's Raina Nightclub on New Year's Eve 2017. The attacks, respectively, left 41 and 39 people dead. Further attacks in the Swedish capital of Stockholm, St Petersburg, Russia and New York killed a total of 28 people.

Uzbekistan is the most populous nation of the former Soviet states of Central Asia, and it borders Afghanistan, as well as the strategically important nations of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Although little reported in the Western media, it has proved to be fertile ground for Islamic radicals since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, due largely to a mixture of economic hardship and the harsh repression of religious and political dissent.

Resisting Repression

Uzbekistan's long serving authoritarian leader Islam Karimov died in 2016. His death ended a 25-year reign during which, intent on thwarting the influence of radical Islam emanating from Afghanistan, Karimov turned the nation into a repressive police state. Karimov began a crackdown on Islam in 1994 that culminated in 2005 in the Andijan tragedy, which some sources estimate left as many as 1,000 people dead. [1] However, a recent report by Colonel Jeffery Hartman, the former U.S. defense attaché to Uzbekistan, indicates that this number was likely closer to 200. [2]

Thousands of Uzbeks had gathered in Andijan's Babur Square, demanding bread, jobs and greater access to education. The government claimed the gathering had been instigated by armed anti-government elements from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). According to witnesses, Uzbek security forces opened fire, indiscriminately killing women and children (Gazeta.ru, May 13, 2005). The Andijan tragedy remains highly controversial: the Uzbek government maintains it acted against terrorists, while witnesses say security forces re-

pressed legitimate local voices calling for reform (Fergana.news, July 12, 2005).

Uzbekistan's current leader, Shavkat Mirziyaev, has promised to address the repression of the past, stating that "it is necessary to reform the civil service institution, [and] introduce effective measures to combat corruption" (MoFA, December 22, 2017). Thus far, however, there has been little action to match the rhetoric, and the danger remains that young Uzbeks, faced with repression and instability, will seek alternatives and become radicalized. Over the past quarter-century, many Uzbeks have been driven into the arms of jihadist groups—first into domestic organizations like the formerly Taliban-aligned IMU and now increasingly into the arms of Islamic State (IS).

The IMU's stated goal was to overthrow the Karimov regime and replace it with an Islamic caliphate. Its top military commander, Juma Namangani, honed his combat skills in the Soviet forces that invaded Afghanistan in the 1980s and in the civil war that broke out in Tajikistan in 1992. In 1998, he teamed up with the self-proclaimed preacher Tahir Yuldashev in the Fergana Valley to establish the IMU.

From bases in Afghanistan, the IMU made incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan and focused on reaching the Uzbek capital of Tashkent in 1999 and 2000. The late 1990s proved to be a high point for the group, however. Namangani was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Afghanistan in 2001, and Yuldashev was killed in fighting along the Afghan-Pakistan border, where his group had taken refuge, in 2009 (Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, November 21, 2001; Fergana.news, September 9, 2009).

At the height of their power, Namangani and Yuldashev relied on IMU militants who were battle-tested soldiers from the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Tajik Civil War and the Chechen wars. The IMU funded its activities through the drug trade, using smuggling routes in Central Asia that tapped into the Russian and European markets. The breakdown of stability in northern Afghanistan and the potential for a Dagestani insurgency in Russia's southwest promise a return to this type of narco-terrorism in the region (The Moscow Times, February 27). The beneficiaries of this will likely be Uzbek fighters with IS in Syria, who appear set to take the place of IMU as the standard bearer of Uzbek militancy (Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, May 3, 2016).

Noah Tucker, editor of Registan.net, estimates there are 500-1,000 Uzbeks fighting for IS in Syria and Iraq. Most troubling is the presence of teenage boys fighting for IS, sometimes known as "Cubs of the Caliphate" (al-Jazeera, October 25, 2017). By some estimates, as many as 600 children serving in IS in the region, many conducting grizzly executions of prisoners. In a video released by IS on August 26, 2016, five young boys in military fatigues can be seen killing Kurdish fighters.

A Troubled Region

At the very least, high-profile attacks by Uzbek nationals in Europe and the United States, as well as the abuse of Central Asian children by IS in Syria and Iraq, should turn the international spotlight on the conditions that push Uzbeks into extremism. Weak education, corruption, economic hardship and the severe repression of Islam leave many Uzbeks susceptible to extremist rhetoric that promises meaning and freedom in the form of jihad.

IS recruitment strategies work remarkably well in Uzbekistan and the neighboring countries of Central Asia, which have, for many years, faced similar economic and religious challenges. In her 2003 Congressional testimony, Fiona Hill, now President Donald Trump's National Security Council senior director for European and Russian affairs, stated that "repression and persecution exacerbate existing social and political problems, discredit regional governments domestically and internationally, and increase suspicion of official institutions among the population … It is not difficult to imagine that many moderate, non-religious dissidents would be driven to more extremist views by the intolerant policies of the Uzbek regime." [3]

Although it is likely the Uzbek security forces will continue to use repressive measures as they seek to tackle the jihadist threat, a more nuanced approach like that recommended by Fiona Hill in 2003 would likely have a greater chance of success. Absent such an approach, it is clear that Uzbeks and other Central Asians will continue to be radicalized at home and abroad, with dire consequences for the citizens of western capitals who understand little about this obscure but vital region.

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tanbul International Community School. He is Director of Studies for the Open Society Foundations' New Scholars Program. Follow him on Twitter at @danaeabizaid.

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[1] Uzbekistan. Class Dismissed: Discriminatory Expulsions of Muslim Students. Publication. Vol. 11. No. 12D, Human Rights Watch, 1998.
See: *https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/uzbekistan/uzbek-02.htm*

[2] Hartman, Jeffry W. *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising: What We Know*. Publication. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, 2016.
See: http://isdp.eu/content/uploads/2016/06/2016-Hartman-the-May-2005-Andijan-Uprising-What-We-Know.pdf

[3] See Fiona Hill's testimony the House Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia (Brookings Institution, 23 July 2003).

The UAE's Divisive Strategy in Yemen

Kelly F. Thornberry

Yemen has become a major battleground for the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE provides the second largest force in the Saudi-led military coalition fighting in the country. While the coalition came about to halt the advances of the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, however, the UAE has since focused on its own agenda.

By backing certain warring parties, the UAE hopes to confront both the Shia Houthi rebels, backed by Iran, and tackle the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. Further, the UAE's strategy not only aims to address the perceived threat of the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), but it also reflects Abu Dhabi's aspirations for greater geopolitical influence in the region.

Shia Iran, which has a long-standing territorial dispute with the UAE, remains a rival regional power that represents a threat to the Sunni Arab monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Meanwhile, the UAE is also dedicating more resources to its confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood and its political outfit in Yemen—the al-Islah party.

Aden Clashes

For the UAE, Yemen is increasingly a space where it is extending its power, working with local partners—notably southern secessionists and remnants of the regime of the late president Ali Abdullah Saleh—at the expense of the internationally recognized government.

The UAE's strategy to raise its geopolitical standing includes a very significant naval dimension, and Abu Dhabi has moved to seize more control of strategically important shipping routes.

The main justification for the coalition's intervention was to shore up Yemen's internationally recognized government in the face of the Houthi rebels. Nevertheless, recent developments indicate that the UAE favors supporting alternative partners, most significantly the southern secessionists of the Southern Transitional

Council (STC), and the remnants of Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC).

The government, albeit weak and dysfunctional, has been an important partner for the Saudi-led coalition. However, on January 28, UAE-backed STC forces launched an operation to capture and control the city of Aden. The port city is the seat of Yemen's beleaguered government—while President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi lives in Saudi Arabia, the cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid Bin Daghr, still resides there.

Neither Hadi nor Bin Daghr are members of the Muslim Brotherhood's al-Islah party, but government institutions and the military are dominated by al-Islah's members and allies. In the eyes of the UAE, that represents a threat at least equal to, and probably now greater than, the Shia Houthis. As a consequence, the STC attacked government positions in the city and demanded Bin Daghar's removal.

The uprising was brought to an end by Saudi-UAE mediation in February. Though Bin Daghr kept his position, the STC, led by general Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, gained significant areas of control in the city (al-Arabiya January 30; sabq.org, February 1).

The UAE's Priorities

The UAE has always considered the Muslim Brotherhood to be a national security threat. In the 1990s and early 2000s, tensions existed between the government and the Brotherhood, and crackdowns on Emirati members of the movement resulted in hundreds of arrests. After the wave of Arab Spring protests across the MENA region in 2011, the UAE grew even more concerned about the group.

Despite the UAE's population enjoying one of the world's highest living standards and generous government subsidies and welfare payments, members of the Emirati branch of the Muslim Brotherhood called for more reform and more rights. The government's response was to arrest five Brotherhood members and charge them with offending the ruler (al-Khaleej al-Jadeed, November 25, 2016).

Faced with what appeared to be the growing appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the MENA region—manifested in the group winning elections in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya—the UAE set in motion an anti-Brotherhood strategy opting to support any viable force that confronted the group.

This intensified after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain cut diplomatic ties and imposed sanctions on Qatar, accusing their Gulf neighbor of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar denies supporting the group, but unlike its accusers does not ban the organization and believes it should be included in political processes around the region. It has supported Brotherhood-led governments elected in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as backing Brotherhood-linked factions in Libya and Syria.

With Qatar under pressure, the UAE aims to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood across the region. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE support the military government of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, which removed the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi from power and cracked down on the Egyptian branch of the group, the oldest and strongest in the MENA region.

The situation in Yemen, however, is more complicated. The UAE could not exclude the Brotherhood's al-Islah party as it was a powerful component in the opposition, and had been central to the protest movement that in 2012 brought an end to then-President Saleh's 32-year reign. However, the UAE supported politicians who occupied senior positions in post-Saleh Yemen, the most prominent among them being former prime minister Khalid Bahah who had been minister of oil under Saleh between 2006 and 2008 and had a reputation as a reformer (arabi21.com, April 29, 2017). [1]

Allies Divided

Saudi Arabia, by contrast, is committed to supporting the Hadi government as part of the deal that led to Saleh's removal and exempts al-Islah from its classification of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. In the wake of the Aden clashes, the difference between the strategies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE has become clearer. While Saudi Arabia leads the coalition and commands the largest force within it, the UAE has moved more quickly to influence internal Yemeni dynamics for its own interests.

The division between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over Yemen can be traced to Hadi's decision last year, made

from his base in Saudi Arabia, to replace the UAE-backed Prime Minister Bahah with rival Bin Dhagar. Hadi also elevated General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, an ally of al-Islah and once Saleh's lieutenant, and appoint him vice president, another position that Bahah had previously held.

While Saudi Arabia did not necessarily support Hadi's decisions, neither did it oppose them. The UAE, however, condemned the move and embarked on a strategy that aimed to break the alliance between the Houthis and Saleh, deciding the latter would be the best hope of defeating the Houthis in northern Yemen. Meanwhile, in the south, the UAE also supported the formation of the STC (Sky News Arabia, May 21, 2017).

Saleh made his move in December and turned against the Houthis. However, his uprising in Sana'a failed, and his former Houthi allies killed him (al-Jazeera, December 4, 2017). The UAE quickly embraced his nephew, Brigadier General Tariq Saleh, the head of Saleh's protection force, and offered him a refuge in the south. With the support of the UAE, Tariq Saleh is now building a fighting force with the intention of taking on the Houthis in the north (see Militant Leadership Monitor, February 7; al-Jazeera, February 8).

The STC's Aden operation occurred a few weeks after the failed Sana'a uprising. The southern secessionists and Saleh's supporters, enemies for 25 years, are now signaling they are open to cooperation and building a strategic alliance. [2] This remarkable shift, and the alliance of these two actors, demonstrates just how complex the conflict in Yemen has become.

The southern secessionists of the STC and Saleh's supporters had both received support from Shia Iran, but have come to also enjoy the support of Sunni Arab countries opposed to Tehran. The leaders of both groups now spout anti-Iranian rhetoric and claim their strategies are part of a pan-Arab effort led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Hidden Agendas

Outside of Yemen, the UAE has also moved to extend its presence and influence around the Bab al-Mandab strait. In addition to its naval bases in Asab, Eritrea, and Barbara, in the de facto state of Somaliland, the UAE also controls the Yemeni island of Socotra. Yemeni critics of the UAE now openly accuse it of being a colonial force pursuing an agenda to dominate the Bab al-Mandab area (noonpost.org, May 3, 2017).

At the same time, the UAE is accused of wanting to prevent Aden from returning to its "golden age"—in the 1950s, it was one of the busiest harbors in the world, second only to New York—and becoming a rival to Dubai. [3] The UAE denies the claims, but its influence in Yemen, especially in the south, and its naval deployments has put it in a strong strategic position (Yemen Monitor, March 26).

Yemen is a difficult country when it comes to political and military alliances. Its modern history is a litany of civil wars and shifting alliances. From Hadhramaut to Aden, the UAE is supporting local militias and has secured a network of alliances and local partners in various southern Yemeni provinces.

While the tribes have been historically influential in the politics of northern Yemen, the political allegiances in the south are typically formed along provincial lines. Aware of these dynamics, the UAE supported General al-Zubaidi to assume the leadership of the STC. Al-Zubaidi comes from the province of al-Dhala. He and many military officers and local leaders from his home province and neighboring Lahij have deep-rooted feuds with their peers in President Hadi's home province of Abyan.

Another important STC faction is led by the preacher Hani Bin Buraik, who was fired from his cabinet post by President Hadi in April 2017 in a move aimed at curtailing the UAE's influence in Yemen. He has attracted Salafists away from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), but his Islamist credentials have also been important in the confrontation with al-Islah (Sasa Post, November 2, 2017.)

Divide and Conquer

Abu Dhabi has used its proxies to great effect, succeeding in driving AQAP out of the city of al-Mukalla, the provincial capital of Hadhramaut, in 2016 (ME Online, April 24, 2016). Yet the militias are accused of human rights violations and have significantly weakened the power of President Hadi's government, on whose side the Saudi-led coalition is supposedly intervening (al-Jazeera, July 5, 2017).

Meanwhile, the STC secessionist movement, which once received support from Iran and was on friendly terms with the Houthis when Saleh, their common enemy, was in power, is now an ally of the UAE and the coalition. However, while it has encouraged the STC to turn its back Iran, the UAE is unlikely to support a full secession and a return of the old South Yemen state. That would be too costly and would bring new geopolitical challenges. Instead, the UAE benefits from keeping Yemen weak and divided.

The UAE's naval capabilities have led to some successes when attacking the Houthis in costal towns, most evident in the retaking of the port of al-Mukha (al-Ittihad, February 12, 2017). That strength has not been matched by any significant advances elsewhere, however, and in northern Yemen, the UAE's strategy is facing difficulties. Three years since the war started, the coalition, with all its military superiority, is clearly struggling to counter the Houthis.

Tariq Saleh, the UAE's new point man in Yemen, does not seem to be moving fast enough in his attempts to build a force capable of attacking the Houthis and recapturing Sana'a. The southerners, meanwhile, have proven themselves to be a powerful fighting force against the Houthi-Saleh alliance in their areas, but are unlikely to have the same impact in the north.

Before they make a move on Sana'a, the UAE and its allies may need to address the fronts of Taiz and Marib, where most of the forces loyal to the government and sympathetic to al-Islah are concentrated. Further, any fundamental progress for the UAE's efforts in Yemen will require Saudi approval.

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NOTES

[1] Bahah made his reputation when as minister of oil between 2006-2008, introducing anti-corruption measures. He reportedly angered influential figures within the ruling establishment, leading to his removal. He later served ambassador to Canada and then the UN.

[2] See interview with General Aidarus al-Zubaidi head of the STC (Youtube, January 30).

[3] See Mawby, Spencer. *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorates* 1955-1967, Last Outpost of a Middle East Empire. Routledge, London 2005. p.16