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NIGERIA: TALKING TO BOKO HARAM

Alexander Sehmer

A presidential offer of amnesty for Boko Haram fighters who lay down their weapons has had little apparent effect on militant activity in northeastern Nigeria, with more than a dozen people killed in a recent clash between Islamist fighters and the country's security forces.

Boko Haram fighters using suicide bombers and mortars attacked two villages and a military base near Maiduguri, in Borno State, on April 2, killing at least 15 people (Sahara Reporters, April 2). Though the attack was the largest since the government made the surprise announcement that it had been holding ceasefire talks with the group, it is far from the only one (ANA, March 26; All Africa, March 26). Four suicide bombers detonated their devices on the outskirts of Maiduguri on March 30, killing one person and wounding 13 others (Sahara Reporters, March 31). Boko Haram fighters also attacked a town in Konduga on March 25, although security forces appear to have successfully repelled them (Premium Times, March 26).

Although there was speculation about a similar move under the administration of former President Goodluck Jonathan in 2012, the ceasefire talks are a new development. It came at a time when the government was riding high on the release of the Dapchi schoolgirls, who were abducted by Boko Haram in February (Daily Trust, March 25).

President Muhammadu Buhari used a meeting with the newly freed girls to announce his administration would respond favorably to "repentant" Boko Haram fighters (Premium Times, March 23). That offer has not, however, received universal acclaim. Groups such as the Christian Association of Nigeria have criticized the move as an admission of weakness on the part of the government (Punch, March 24; Twitter, March 23).

Nevertheless, the proposed amnesty is light on detail, raising a number of questions, including whether such a deal would mean immunity from prosecution. Further, if it follows the precedent of a similar deal with rebels in the Niger Delta in 2009, would the government be effectively paying off Islamist militants? Furthermore, would such a deal be possible when the differences are at least as much ideological as they are socio-economic? Conceivably, it might be—despite government denials,

it appears the release of the Dapchi schoolgirls was secured by a ransom payment rather than negotiation (Sahara Reporters, March 21).

At any rate, the recent attacks suggest there is still a ways to go before those details will be firmed up. However, with the military apparently unable to fully bring Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency to a conclusion, President Buhari may well be right to introduce a political element into the mix.

SOMALIA: STILL MUCH IN NEED OF AMISOM

Alexander Sehmer

Al-Shabaab fighters have reportedly killed dozens of Ugandan troops in an attack on the forces of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). It comes as regional political developments raise questions about AMISOM's future and effectiveness.

On April 1, al-Shabaab fighters attacked an AMISOM base in Bulamarer, a town about 80 miles southwest of Mogadishu, exploding two suicide car bombs by the base before opening fire and attacking nearby villages (The Standard, April 2). The group claimed to have killed as many as 59 Ugandan soldiers in the attack (Garowe Online, April 1). Ugandan military officials said only four of their soldiers were killed, while Western media sources put the number somewhere in between the two.

Ugandan troops make up a core contingent of AMISOM, a contribution recognized by Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed at a summit last month (Garowe Online, March 4). The regional force—which is also comprised of troops from Kenya, Burundi, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Sierra Leone—has been deployed in Somalia since 2007, where it has had success pushing back al-Shabaab. Even so, its territorial gains remain shaky, and a plan to reduce AMISOM troop numbers and hand over operations to local security forces has worried Somalia's neighbors.

Uganda in particular is pushing for the plan to be delayed and AMISOM troop numbers to be restored to former levels (All Africa, March 3). Not all of AMISOM's contributing nations may share Uganda's position, however. Less concerned may be Ethiopia, were the unexpected resignation of its prime minister in February has re-focused the country on its own political problems and simmering ethnic tensions (al-Jazeera, February 15). Ethiopia makes a crucial contribution of about 4,400 troops to the 22,000-strong AMISOM force, and it has been a key Western ally in the fight against terrorism. The troops Ethiopia contributes would be difficult to replace.

Concerns about the drawdown of AMISOM troops are difficult to dismiss. Al-Shabaab continues to carry out successful attacks in Somalia, including in the capital Mogadishu (Garowe Online, March 25; Shabelle News,

March 29). The Somali government is embroiled in a political crisis around attempts to oust Parliament Speaker Osman Jawaari (Horn Observer, March 31). And the security forces themselves appear unready—in March, rival factions within the military reportedly clashed in Jowhar, in the Middle Shabelle region, leading to a two-day standoff (Radio Dalsan, March 30).

International support, such as the provision by the United States of surveillance drones, is welcome but can only go so far (Garowe Online, February 27). AMISOM is an important security presence on the ground, and Somalia appears likely to require the support of its neighbors for some time to come.

The Threat From British Jihadists After the Caliphate's Fall

James Brandon

Since the emergence in 2013 of the Islamic State of Syria and al-Sham, later Islamic State (IS), followed by its declaration of a caliphate, the British government has estimated that over 850 British citizens and residents travelled to join the group in Iraq and Syria. [1] Of these, it said that 400 had returned to the United Kingdom (UK), and around 15 percent, or about 120, had been killed. The remainder—around 300 individuals—are still active in Iraq and Syria, or are in neighboring countries such as Turkey. The director general of MI5, the UK's internal security service, said in October 2017 that to contain this threat, the intelligence services were operating at a scale "greater than ever before," including running 500 "live operations" and monitoring 3,000 individuals "engaged in extremist activity." [2] The authorities have disrupted 13 attacks since June 2013 (BBC, March 6). Nonetheless, since then, jihadists have carried out three significant attacks in the UK, killing 31 people.

Militants Abroad and Attacks at Home

British jihadists played a minor role in supporting IS' forerunner, al-Qaeda in Iraq, in the mid-2000s. IS, however, attracted significant numbers of UK nationals after its capture of Raqqa and Mosul, in January and June 2014 respectively, and its subsequent declaration of a caliphate. The large number of recruits was catalyzed by a number of factors, such as a desire to "protect" Sunnis against the Iran-backed governments of Iraq and Syria, or an attempt to fulfil various emotional and psychological needs and achieve a sense of belonging. Above all, however, recruits appear to have been attracted to the idea of an "Islamic State" and its enforcement of sharia. For instance, Tareena Shakil, a healthcare worker who was convicted in 2016 of joining IS, told the court that she travelled to join the group because she wanted to live "under sharia law," and that her decision was "not about fighting or killing anybody." Indeed, the caliphate's primary attraction for UK recruits is mainly ideological; aside from a desire to live under hardline Islamic law, recruits have very little in common in terms of age, education and other socio-economic factors.

Since IS' declaration of the caliphate, attacks in the UK have included using a vehicle to mow down pedestrians in Westminster, carried out by an individual apparently inspired by IS; a vehicle and knife attack near London Bridge by three individuals again inspired by IS; and a bomb attack in Manchester by a lone individual, who seems likely to have received specific bomb-making training from militants in Libya shortly beforehand. Significantly, all three individuals had substantial prior exposure to British radical networks; respectively in radical mosques in Luton, a hotbed of hardline Salafism, through the pro-jihadist al-Muhajiroun network in London, and through family links to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a defunct organization formerly aligned with al-Qaeda.

Notably, however, aside from the Manchester bomber's trip to Libya, none of these individuals had spent time in Iraq or Syria, and little evidence of direct contact with jihadists inside the IS caliphate has yet surfaced. Although, evidence of such links may still emerge in due course. However, some other attempted attacks show more direct links with IS-held territory. For instance, in September 2017, an 18-year-old Iraqi asylum seeker attempted to set off a homemade bomb on a metro train, although the device exploded at Parsons Green station without causing any fatalities. This individual had received training prior to arriving in the UK in October 2015. Although he denies the charges against him, from an earlier interview it appears this may have been conventional military training (BBC, March 17). However, there is no evidence that IS directly assisted with his attack.

In addition, there is no evidence that any of the 13 disrupted plots (referenced above) were directed by IS central leadership. Therefore, this would seem to suggest that IS' leadership has not significantly prioritized attacks in the UK, in contrast to its clear involvement in planning the November 2015 Paris and July 2016 Nice attacks. Given the sheer number of IS sympathizers in the UK and the large number of British citizens fighting with the group, this would appear to be a deliberate decision. Perhaps this reflects that the UK—due to its geography, strong security services and strict controls on guns and explosive purchases—is seen by the group as a relatively challenging and therefore less attractive target.

The Returnee Threat

However, even if IS' leaders have not prioritized attacks in the UK, the large numbers of returnees seems likely to increase the threat in the longer term. No public information is available on what proportion of returnees continue to support IS. Many are likely to be, to some extent, disillusioned with the group or fearful of what might happened to them if they had remained in Iraq or Syria. By contrast, those who have remained in these areas are likely to be the most ideologically committed and, given their involvement in atrocities, those who have the most to fear from returning home. It is notable that Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, two of four British jihadists known as "The Beatles," who were prominently involved in the torture and killing of Western hostages, were captured in February by Kurdish forces in Syria—they do not appear to have been attempting to return to the UK. Rather, some reports suggested they were seeking to cross into Turkey.

A gray area likely exists in which many returnees are disillusioned by aspects of IS, but remain supportive of some of the group's principles and actions, like its commitment to creating an Islamic State and enforcing sharia. Indeed, it is notable that no British IS returnees have publicly spoken out against the group, even though that would likely lead the authorities to take a more lenient approach toward them. While such silence may be motivated by fear, it may also suggest continuing sympathy. It is possible that IS—or successor jihadist groups—may yet be able to weaponize such latent sympathies, whether through propaganda, or by reaching out to them directly through informal networks of international IS veterans, which are likely to persist for decades.

The lack of IS returnee attacks to date may also reflect that the group's propaganda networks remain disrupted. For instance, the monthly English-language online magazine *Rumiyah* has not been published since September. This occurred shortly before the group lost Raqqa, one of its last major cities and a hub for foreigner-led propaganda efforts. It is therefore possible that if the group re-invigorates its propaganda activities—and particularly if it succeeds in forming a coherent narrative for its losses—it will succeed in catalyzing the large returnee population, especially if it successfully portrays its rule as a golden era and blames the West for the failure of its governance project.

Danger Ahead

The threat of increased returnee attacks, potentially with greater direct IS input, may be compounded by government uncertainty over how to deal with the issue. For instance, Rory Stewart, a junior but influential Foreign Office minister, claims "the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them" (BBC, October 23, 2017). Meanwhile, the government has removed citizenship from at least 200 foreign fighters, in an attempt to stop them from returning (The Times, February 17). This, however, could have complex repercussions, for instance through perpetuating an aggrieved UK foreign fighter population abroad that may be increasingly motivated to organize strikes at home.

In contrast to this tough approach abroad, the treatment of many returnees has been exceedingly lenient, with only a fraction of returnees prosecuted. Indeed, a recent parliamentary report on terrorist sentencing recommended that—such was the level of prison radicalization and that absence of an effective de-radicalization scheme—those convicted of more minor terrorism offensives should receive a non-custodial sentence.

Other trends also exist that could trigger an increase in IS violence in the UK, including by IS veterans and returnees. If IS continues building its presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including in Kashmir, the group will have increased access to British Muslim communities, nearly half of which derive from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Similarly, IS' efforts to establish itself in Somalia, where it is in direct competition with the well-established al-Qaeda-aligned al-Shabaab group, could also give it increased reach into British-Somali communities. Many in these communities are from Puntland, where IS has achieved some success at the hands of Abdul Qadir Mumin, who himself lived in the UK in the mid-2000s (see Militant Leadership Monitor, October 5, 2016). Due to these factors, although returnees have played a limited role in IS-linked violence in the UK to date, there is clear potential for these veterans to play an increased role in UK terrorism in the years ahead.

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NOTES

[1] Parliament, "British Nationals Abroad: Middle East: Written question – 127983", February 19, 2018 *http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-02-19/127983*

[2] Transcript of Andrew Parker speech, October 17, 2017, MI5.gov.uk (https://www.mi5.gov.uk/who-we-are-video-transcript)

[3] UK Parliament, "Letter from the Chair of the Justice Committee to the Chairman of the Sentencing Council, dated 24 January 2018" https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmjust/746/74604.htm

Islamic State a Deadly Force in Kabul

Mukhtar A. Khan

Afghanistan is no stranger to brutal terrorist attacks, but this year began with a series of particularly vicious deadly attacks in Kabul, the only secured and highly fortified city in the country. Even more worryingly, most of these attacks were claimed by the local franchise of Islamic State (IS), known as IS-Khorasan. Over the first three months of the year, the group carried out more than six attacks, targeting a military hospital, the Supreme Court, police officers, the military and Afghanistan's Shia minority. Last year, between October and December, IS-Khorasan carried out over half a dozen bombings in Kabul and killed over 130 people.

IS formally launched its Afghanistan operations on January 10, 2015, when Pakistani and Afghan militants pledged their allegiance to its so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq (Lomritob, February 8). Since then, IS-Khorasan has proved itself to be one of group's most brutal iterations, attacking soft targets, targeting Shia populations, killing Sufis and destroying shrines, as well as beheading its own dissidents, kidnapping their children and marrying off their widows.

Tactical Decisions and Strategic Targets

IS-Khorasan chose to base itself in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province, a strategic location bordering Pakistan's tribal areas. Its recruits came from both sides of the porous border and could easily escape a surgical strike or military operation by fleeing to either side of the Durand line. It took them only a few weeks to expand their outreach from their Nangarhar base to at least four other provinces in the east, south and west, namely Logar, Zabul, Helmand and Farah provinces (BBC Pashto, February 25, 2017).

The presence of IS-Khorasan in these five provinces was important from a strategic point of view. Nangarhar is, no doubt, a safe place for staging militant activities and recruitment due to its geographical proximity to Pakistan, while Logar is considered a gateway into Kabul and is frequently used as a staging ground for attacks in the capital. During the war against the Soviets, it was referred to as *Bab-ul-Jihad* (the Gate to Jihad). Zabul is equally important, being a transit route for insurgents and also for U.S./NATO supplies and convoys. Helmand, despite a large presence of international troops, has its own importance as a home to the Taliban and a hub for the drugs trade, a lifeline for insurgents, including IS-Khorasan. Finally, the eastern province of Farah, into which the group infiltrated within the first few weeks of its existence, borders Iran and has a sizable Shia majority population (Mashriq TV, January 6).

From the very beginning, IS-Khorasan identified its targets—Shia communities, foreign troops, the security forces, the Afghan central government and the Taliban, who had not previously been challenged by an insurgent group.

Despite rigorous bombing and military operations against IS-Khorasan—including the deployment of the largest conventional bomb, the GBU-43 Massive Ordnance Air Blast, in April last year—the group has maintained its presence in almost 30 districts across the country. In the north, the group has made bases in Kohistanat, Sar-e-Pol province, Khanabad, Kunduz province and Darzab, Jowzjan province. Its penetration and influence in the north has worried the Central Asian Republics and Russia (Shamshad TV, January 22). IS has attracted and recruited militants from terrorist outfits like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). However, it is the Kabul Cells of IS-Khorasan that has most concerned the Afghan government and the international community.

Attacks by Kabul Cells

Kabul became the first target on the IS-Khorasan agenda after the group established a base in neighboring Logar province in early 2015. From the beginning, it carried out small-scale attacks and targeted killings, but most of these went unnoticed by the international media.

It received more attention when it carried out at least four targeted attacks against Shia Muslims in Kabul late in 2016. The first attack was in July that year when two suicide bombers struck a peaceful rally of Shia minority and killed about 80 people and wounded more than 230, the deadliest attack in Kabul since 2001. The Taliban condemned these attacks, which marked a shift in the 40-year long war in Afghanistan along more sectarian lines.

Since then, the group has expanded its operations, with at least three IS-Khorasan cells in operation in Kabul. These are unconventionally structured terrorist cells in comparison to others in Afghanistan, which goes some way to explaining how they have remained undetected. Many of those involved are middle-class, educated people, including professors, doctors, engineers and young university students. They go about their work and in the evenings meet to plan, before returning to their homes. They change and adapt their tactics to the changing needs and situations.

Afghan security forces claim to have busted several such cells recently. One such cell, IS-Khorasan's coordination and planning center, which had been used for storing weapons and ammunition, was uncovered and busted in January. Another 13-member IS cell in Kabul was busted in January, and had allegedly been planning a series of major terror attacks in the city (Tolo News, January 3).

Over time, these cells have become increasingly active, sophisticated and barbaric. Despite tight security, IS-Khorasan was able to attack a Shia crowed near Kart-e-Sakhi shrine in Kabul on March 21, while worshipers were celebrating Nowruz, the New Year festival. The suicide bomber killed at least 33 people and injured 65 (Shamshad TV, March 22). On March 9, an IS-affiliated suicide bomber attacked a Shia crowd in Kabul and killed at least nine people who had gathered to mark the anniversary of the death of their leader, Abdul Ali Mazari (BBC Pashto, March 9). Only a day before, fighters from IS-Khorasan stormed Sardar Daud Hospital, the largest military hospital in Kabul, and killed more than 30 people. The gunmen had dressed as doctors. In February, the group attacked the Afghan Supreme Court, killing 22 people in the immediate vicinity (Radio Azadi, February 8). IS-Khorasan called those they attacked "apostates" and "tyrant judges with blasphemous judgments."

The group also took responsibility for the January 4 suicide attack in Kabul, which claimed the lives of more than 20 people, including a number of police officers (Tolo News, January 5). Just a week before, it claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on a Shia cultural center in Kabul, in which more than 41 people were killed and another 84 were wounded (Tolo News, December 28, 2017). On Christmas Day, IS struck near the building of the Afghan intelligence service and killed six people. And just a week before Christmas, IS attacked another intelligence center in the capital.

Brutal and Resilient

IS-Khorasan has modeled its brutal tactics on those of its parent operation in Iraq and Syria. It considers itself to be the only pure Islamic group, rejecting the radical but more traditional Deobandi Sunni Taliban and the Salafist beliefs of al-Qaeda. IS-Khorasan promotes an ideology that classifies Shias as apostates, although Afghanistan had been largely unfamiliar with sectarian violence, and their methods have often been found unacceptable in Afghanistan's traditional society (Daily Wahdat, January 18).

This has, however, left IS-Khorasan isolated. Not only are the Afghan government and its U.S. allies seeking to combat it, but neighboring countries including Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian states and Russia have showed serious concerns at its growing influence. Furthermore, while there are some 20 terrorist outfits operating in Afghanistan, none are friendly to IS.

Over the last three years, the Taliban has fought the group. The Afghan government is conducting operations to uproot them. U.S. and NATO forces continue to bomb their bases. General John Nicholson, commander of NATO-led forces in Afghanistan, has said that since March 2017, they conducted some 1,400 operations against IS-Khorasan and killed half of their fighters, estimating that about 1,500 remain (1TV News, February 25).

The reality on the ground, however, is that IS influence and attacks are becoming more pervasive and more deadly. Dozens of IS-Khorasan senior leaders, including its four emirs, were killed in air strikes and operations leaving IS-Khorasan as a somewhat leaderless group, but it has not lost its strength to strike back in Kabul or been forced from its stronghold in Nangarhar. Indeed, the Afghan media claims that in recent months the group has been able to attract disgruntled Taliban members and foreign fighters, including militants from China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Chechnya, France, Algeria and Pakistan (Lemar TV, February 18).

Implications for Afghanistan

IS-Khorasan remains unpopular among the deeply traditional society of Afghanistan, but it has proven itself able to lure Taliban defectors and disgruntled youth to its cause. The group's propaganda is more sophisticated than that of the country's other militant group, with dedicated teams for social media platforms—a major concern for many Afghans because of social media's popularity among the Afghan youth (Shamshad TV, January 20; Pajhwok News, December 5, 2017).

There are fears that if IS-Khorasan continues to gain ground and influence, fleeing jihadists from Syria and Iraq will make Afghanistan a new base for their efforts to form an Islamic caliphate (Daily Hewad, March 10). With Afghanistan struggling to reach political settlements with its insurgent groups, a strengthened IS-Khorasan could deepen the sectarian rifts the group has established in the country, and this would make it harder to bring about the social cohesion necessary for this kind of dialogue. If IS-Khorasan cannot be effectively countered, then the political landscape of an already complex society stands to become even more complicated.

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Salafists, Mercenaries and Body Snatchers: The War for Libya's South

Andrew McGregor

Renewed fighting in southern Libya around the Kufra and Sabha oases demonstrates the difficulty of reaching anything more substantial than temporary and fragile political agreements in the region. The parties to the seemingly intractable conflict in the south include a range of legitimate and semi-legitimate actors—forces allied to Libya's rival governments, self-appointed police and border security services—and illegitimate actors, such as foreign mercenaries, bandits, jihadists and traffickers.

The fact that membership of these groups often overlaps leads to heated clashes over turf and privileges that endanger the civilian population while inhibiting sorely-needed development initiatives. On March 13, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) warned that the buildup of armed forces in the south "risks further escalation" of the ongoing violence. [1] Tensions are so high at present that even the remains of the 19th century head of the Sanusi order have been pulled into the struggle for the resource-rich deserts of southern Libya.

The Madkhali Infiltration

The Saudi-backed Madkhalist religious sect is the most prominent player in the Kufra and Sabha violence. A basic tenet of Madkhalism is respect for legitimate authority, the w*ali-al-amr*. This Salafist movement was first introduced to Libya by Muammar Gaddafi to counter Libya's more revolutionary Salafist groups. Madkhalist militias in Libya typically seek to control local policing duties, providing them a degree of immunity while enforcing Salafist interpretations of sharia that have little in common with traditional Libyan Islamic practice.

Although Saudi sect leader Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali issued a surprising declaration of support in 2016 for General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in its fight against "the Muslim Brotherhood" (i.e. the Tripoli-based government), Libya's Madkhalis do not appear to have a preferred allegiance in the rivalry be-

tween Tripoli's Presidency Council/Government of National Accord (PC/GNA) and Haftar's military coalition (see Militant Leadership Monitor, January 11, 2017; Arabi21.com, September 21, 2016). Indeed, they appear to be covering their bases by supporting both rivals while avoiding direct conflict with each other.

The Madkhalis in Tripoli are represented by the Rada Special Deterrence Force, led by Abd al-Rauf al-Kara. Nominally loyal to the PC/GNA but operating largely independently of government control, they act as a self-appointed police force complete with private jails reputed to be dens of torture (Middleeasteye.net, January 15).

Meanwhile, the growing Madkhali armed presence in Benghazi appears to be meeting resistance. The January 25 twin car-bombing that killed 41 people in Benghazi, including LNA commander Ahmad al-Fitouri, appears to have targeted the Bayaat al-Radwan mosque frequented by Madkhalist militia members (Libya Herald, January 23). The Madkhalists also dominate the 604th Infantry Battalion in Misrata (Libya Tribune, November 4, 2017).

Body-Snatching at Kufra Oasis

A combination of fresh water and nearly impassable desert depressions on three sides make southeast Libya's remote Kufra Oasis an inevitable stop for cross-desert convoys or caravans. Some 1,500 kilometers (km) from the Libyan coast, Kufra is now a major stop for the flow of illegal migrants that Kufra Mayor Muftah Khalil says is overwhelming local security services (Libya Observer, March 5). Since the 2011 Libyan Revolution, Kufra has several times erupted in tribal violence, usually pitting the Zuwaya Arabs against indigenous black semi-nomadic Tubu tribesmen, whose homeland stretches across southern Libya, northern Chad, northwestern Sudan and northeastern Niger. There is long-standing friction between the two communities—the Zuwaya were only able to take possession of Kufra in 1840 by driving out the Tubu.

Things have been heating up in the Kufra region in recent months, as Sudanese mercenaries clash with LNA forces and Subul al-Salam, a local Madkahlist militia affiliated with the LNA. In the last days of 2017, Subul al-Salam attacked *al-Taj* ("The Crown"), a height overlooking the Kufra Oasis, destroying the funerary shrine and stealing the remains of Sayyid Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Sanusi, who built a proto-Islamic state in the Sahara and Sahel from 1859 until his death in 1902.

A former representative for Kufra, al-Tawati al-Ayda, insisted that the vehicles used in the attack bore the insignia of the LNA. He also suggested the attack was inspired by the arrival in Kufra of Tripoli Madkhalist preacher Majdi Hafala (Libya Observer, January 2).

The Sanusi are a conservative Sufi religious order that grew into a powerful political and military organization in the 19th and early 20th centuries, resisting invasion by the French and later the Italians. Founded in Mecca by Muhammad al-Mahdi's Algerian father in 1837, the order's rapid growth after moving to Libya in 1843 attracted the attention of the Ottoman rulers of Libya, and the movement shifted south, out of Ottoman control, to the oasis of Jaghbub in 1856.

The conservative asceticism at the core of the movement had wide appeal to the desert communities and tribes. This was especially true in the southern oasis of Kufra, to which al-Mahdi moved the Sanusi headquarters in 1895. Using the trade routes that ran through Kufra, al-Mahdi introduced the commerce-friendly Sanusi brand of Islam to the Saharan and sub-Saharan interior of Africa. The Zuwaya Arabs of Kufra became adherents to the Sanusi *tariqa* (path) and defenders of the Sanusi family. Today, the Zuwaya form the core of the Subul al-Salam militia responsible for the assault on *al-Taj*.

While they enjoyed more influence in Cyrenaïca than Tripolitania, the Sanusis eventually formed Libya's post-Second World War pro-Western monarchy between 1951 and 1969. There is some support in Cyrenaïca for the restoration of the exiled royals as a means of bringing rival government factions together. The current heir to the Libyan throne is Muhammad al-Sanusi, who has not pursued a claim to a revived Sanusi constitutional monarchy, but equally has done nothing to discourage discussions about it within Libya.

After overthrowing the Sanusi monarchy in 1969, Gaddafi began a campaign to malign the Sanusis as the embodiment of the inequities of the old regime and a challenge to the peculiar blend of socialism and Islam he propagated in his *Green Book*. Attitudes shaped by Gaddafist propaganda against the Sanusis still color the way the order is regarded by many modern Libyans.

The desecration at *al-Taj* was quickly denounced by the Presidency Council in Tripoli. The *Dar al-Ifta* (Fatwa House) run by Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani blamed the imported Madkhalilst trend: "Madkhalists are being sent to Libya by Saudi Arabia in order to destabilize the country and abort the revolution. These are all loyalists of Khalifa Haftar and his self-styled army in eastern Libya" (Libyan Express, January 2). *Dar al-Ifta* also used the incident to launch a broader attack on Libya's Madkhalists, which it accused of detaining, torturing and murdering Islamic scholars and clerics who failed to fall into line with the Salafists sect (Libya Observer, January 2). The Madkhalis in turn accuse al-Ghariani of association with the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, and hence a follower of the late revolutionary Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayyid Qutb (executed in Egypt in 1966), the Madkhalis' ideological arch-enemy.

Surprisingly, this is not the first time al-Mahdi's corpse has gone missing—it was disinterred by unknown individuals in 2012 and reburied in a nearby cemetery before relatives recovered it and returned it to the shrine at *al-Taj* (Libya Observer, December 30, 2017).

Operation Desert Rage

Chadian and Sudanese rebels driven from their homelands have turned mercenary in Libya to secure funding and build their arsenals. [2] Grand Mufti al-Ghariani has accused Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of funding the recruitment of African mercenaries to occupy southern Libya on behalf of Haftar's LNA (Libya Observer, March 13). In practice, the rebels have found employment from both the LNA and the PC/GNA government in Tripoli.

Sudanese fighters of Darfur's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) killed six members of the LNA's 106 and 501 Brigades engaged in border security near Jaghbub Oasis on January 15. A seventh LNA soldier was abducted. The area was the site of an earlier clash in October 2016 between JEM and Kufra's Subul al-Salam militia in which 13 JEM fighters were killed (Libya Herald, October 20, 2016).

The LNA responded to the death of the border guards with "Operation Desert Rage," which opened with January 20 airstrikes against what the LNA alleged were Sudanese and Chadian rebels near Rabyana Oasis, 150 km west of Kufra. Possibly involving Egyptian aircraft, the strikes caused "heavy losses" to a 15-vehicle convoy of "terrorists" (TchadConvergence, January 22). The Sudanese and Chadians had been prospecting for gold in the newly discovered deposits near Jabal Uwaynat, the remote meeting point of Egypt, Libya and Sudan (Egypt Today, January 23). The commander of the LNA's Kufra military zone, al-Mabruk al-Ghazwi, said patrols had been sent in every direction to prevent JEM fighters from escaping (Libya Observer, January 20).

Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) spokesman Brigadier Ahmad al-Shami confirmed the presence of Darfuri rebels working as mercenaries in Libya last summer, noting their greatest concentrations were at the oases of Kufra and Rabyana as well as the city of Zintan in Libya's northwest (Libya Observer, July 20, 2017).

The 'Invasion' of Sabha

The Tubu, Awlad Sulayman Arabs and African mercenaries are also engaged in a new round of post-revolutionary fighting in Sabha, capital of Libya's southwestern Fezzan region.

Following the 2011 revolution, the Awlad Sulayman took advantage of shifts in the local tribal power structure to take over Sabha's security services and regional trafficking activities. This brought the Arab group into conflict with the Tubu and Tuareg, who traditionally controlled the cross-border smuggling routes. The result was open warfare in Sabha in 2012 and 2014. One of the leading Awlad Sulayman commanders at the time was Ahmad al-Utaybi, now commander of the Awlad Sulayman-dominated 6th Infantry Brigade.

In mid-February, Haftar announced his decision to join the 6th Brigade with the LNA, but al-Utaybi quickly declared his Brigade's loyalty was to the defense ministry of the GNA government in Tripoli. Following Utaybi's refusal to commit his forces to the LNA, Haftar announced his replacement as commander of the 6th Infantry Brigade with Brigadier Khalifa Abd al-Hafiz Khalifa on February 25, though Khalifa has been unable to assume command (*Al-Sharq al-Aswat*, February 27). At the same time, the 6th Brigade came under heavy attack from alleged Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries working for Haftar. According to al-Utaybi: "The militias who attacked our locations wanted to take control of it and then seize the entire southern region because the fall of

the Brigade means the fall of the security of the south" (Libya Observer, February 24).

Al-Utaybi claims that the fighting is not tribally-based, but is rather a clash between the 6th Brigade and groups loyal to Haftar, consisting largely of Tubu mercenaries from Chad, Niger and Sudan (Libyan Express, March 1; Libya Observer, March 2). [3] There are also claims that the conflict has much to do with the collapse of the Italian agreement with the southern tribes providing them with funding and development aid in return for suppression of migrant flows through Libya to Europe (Eyesonlibya.com, February 27).

The 6th Brigade was forced to withdraw into Sabha's Italian colonial-era fortress. The historic building has been heavily damaged in this round of fighting, with the Libyan Antiquities Authority protesting that: "Those who do not wish us well are seeking to obliterate Libyan history and civilization" (Libya Observer, March 5). The fighting consists largely of artillery attacks on the fortress and ethnic neighborhoods, as well as sniping, assassinations and drive-by killings.

Sabha's mayor, Hamid al-Khayali, insists that well-armed Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries flying the flags of "African countries" were taking advantage of the region's insecurity: "This is an occupation of Libyan land. This is on the shoulders of all Libyans. The south is half-occupied and some Sabha areas are occupied by foreign forces from Sudan, Chad and other countries; why is the Libyan army silent about this?" (Libya Observer, February 25; Libyan Express, February 27).

The long-standing Arab suspicion of the Tubu was reflected in a Presidency Council statement in late February praising the 6th Brigade's defense of Sabha against "mercenaries" intent on changing the south's demographic structure (from Arab-dominant to Tubu-dominant) (Libya Observer, February 27).

Roadblock to Political Resolution

The abduction of Muhammad al-Mahdi's body was, like earlier Salafist demolitions of Sufi shrines in coastal Libya, both a demonstration of Madkhali determination to reform Libya's religious landscape and a provocation designed to reveal what real resistance, if any, exists to prevent further Madkhalist encroachments on Libyan society.

For now the Madkhalists are in ascendance and have made important, even unique, inroads in assuming control of various security services across the country, regardless of which political factions are locally dominant. Reliable salaries, superior weapons and a degree of legal immunity ensure a steady supply of recruits to the Madkhali militias.

However, the Madkhali rejection of democracy, and their indulgence in extra-judicial law enforcement and theological disputes with nearly every other form of Islamic observance, ensures their growing strength will inhibit any attempt to arrive at a democracy-based political solution in Libya.

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NOTES

[1] "UNSMIL statement on the ongoing violence in Sabha," March 13, 2018, https://unsmil.unmissions.org/unsmil-statement-ongoing-violence-sabha

[2] The Chadian groups include the Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (FACT), the Conseil du commandement militaire pour le salut de la République (CCMSR) and the Rassemblement des forces pour le changement (RFC). The Sudanese groups are all from Darfur, and include the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the Sudan Liberation Movement – Unity (SLM-Unity) and the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army –Minni Minnawi (SLM/A-MM). The latter two attempted to return to Darfur in 2017 but were badly defeated by units of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

[3] Libyan Arabs commonly describe the Libyan Tubu as "foreigners" and "illegal immigrants" despite their historic presence in the region.