

Terrorism Monitor

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VOLUME XVI, ISSUE 12

p.1

Alexander Sehmer

BRIEFS

p.3

Farhan Zahid

Islamic State Emboldened in Afghanistan

p.5

Sunguta West

Ansar al-Sunna: A New Militant Islamist Group Emerges in Mozambique

p.7

Nicholas A. Heras

'Security Belt': The UAE's Tribal Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen

SOMALIA: THE GULF CRISIS SPILLS INTO THE HORN OF AFRICA

Alexander Sehmer

Somalia is officially neutral in the Gulf split with Qatar, but it has become a political battleground for the dispute that, if allowed to fester, threatens to undermine Somalia's battle against al-Shabaab.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has helped fund and train the Somali military since 2014, but deteriorating relations brought that to an end in April ([The National](#), April 16). It follows the seizure by Somalia of \$9.6 million from a UAE plane that landed at Mogadishu airport ([Garowe Online](#), April 9; [al-Jazeera](#), April 9). Abu Dhabi said the money was to pay the salaries of members of the Somali military, and complained its personnel on the flight had been held at gunpoint and assaulted by Somali security forces. ([The National](#) [UAE], April 10). The Somali government said it would need to investigate the intended destination of the cash.

In the days that followed, the Somali defense ministry proceeded to take over the UAE's training facility in the capital, thanking the UAE for its efforts ([Radio Dalsan](#),

April 21). Earlier Abu Dhabi suspended operations at a UAE-run hospital in Mogadishu ([Halbeeg](#), April 17). The UAE's development of the Berbera port in Somaliland, and an agreement to train Somaliland security forces there, has also exacerbated tensions ([al-Jazeera](#), March 27).

Qatar has been quick to step in, donating buses and cranes and backing Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo ([Garowe Online](#), May 14; [The Peninsula](#), April 18). This month, with Ramadan coming to an end, Qatar has promised more than \$16 million in aid to Somalia ([The Peninsula](#), June 8). The announcement is partially a slap in the face for Abu Dhabi since among the aid organizations committed to this donation is Qatar Charity, one of the entities blacklisted by Saudi Arabia and the UAE for alleged links to al-Qaeda.

While the UAE and Saudi Arabia see Farmajo's turn to Qatar as ingratitude, the move is neither sudden nor surprising ([Horn Diplomat](#), January 24). The president is less disinterested than Somalia's official position suggests. Qatar donated to the president's election campaign and his chief of staff, Fahad Yasin Dahir, is a former al-Jazeera journalist who has supposedly fostered

the president's relationship with Doha ([All Africa](#), May 31, 2017).

In response, the UAE has backed Farmajo's rivals, including regional administrations that have strained relations with Mogadishu. Undercutting the president, however, is a recipe for instability and a diversion of resources from the scourge of al-Shabaab. Security was upped in the capital this month, in the face of increasing attacks, while the regions also continue to face violence from the group, including an attack in which a U.S. special operations soldier was killed ([Hiiraan Online](#), June 4; [Halbeeg](#), June 9).

To effectively tackle al-Shabaab Mogadishu needs to reconcile with the provincial administrations and soothe its own fractured politics. The worry is that the UAE's support for the regions and Qatar's support for the center will make that increasingly difficult to achieve.

IRAN: TOUGH ON DOMESTIC TERROR THREATS

Alexander Sehmer

Iran has sentenced eight people to death in connection with last year's coordinated terrorist attacks in Tehran, but the Islamic Republic's domestic counter-terrorism efforts are in contrast to its unwillingness to adopt legislative changes to tackle international terrorism financing.

On June 11, Iran's supreme court confirmed death sentences for eight people linked to the attacks on the Iranian parliamentary building and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, which unfolded this time last year leaving 17 people dead ([Mehr](#), June 11; [al-Manar](#), May 13; [Times of Israel](#), May 13). The eight—a further 18 defendants are awaiting trial—supposedly have ties to Islamic State (IS), which claimed to be behind the attack. None have previous convictions, and all have Iranian citizenship. At least one is said to have trained with IS abroad before returning to Iran ([FNA](#), May 13).

Separately, Iranian authorities recently trumpeted the disruption of terrorist cells in the west of the country, along the border with Iraq, that were reportedly planning attacks ([FNA](#), June 8; [Mehr](#), June 10). Officials did not identify these groups, but they were likely Sunni militants opposed to Tehran.

However, the vigor with which Tehran tackles domestic terrorism is not reflected elsewhere. This month, lawmakers delayed signing up to the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the inter-governmental policymaking body that sets international standards for combating money laundering and terrorism financing ([FNA](#), June 10).

Having been on the FATF blacklist since 2008, Iran appeared to find the political will to cooperate in 2016, at a time when Western nations hoped to demonstrate the potential benefits to Tehran of signing up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the P5+1 agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

Tehran has dragged its feet on the necessary changes to bring things in line with FATF recommendations and, with the United States now outside the JCPOA, there is even less incentive. The Iranian parliament will revisit the issue in two months' time, giving it the opportunity to

assess how negotiations go with Germany, France and the United Kingdom—which hope to show the JCPOA can still prove to be beneficial, even without U.S. assistance.

However, committing to FATF could (and arguably should) interfere with Iran’s financial backing for entities such as Hezbollah, and potentially even its own Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Indeed, even if Iran achieves the necessary level of technical compliance, those issues will persist, making it hard to see how FATF can ultimately square this particular circle. Nonetheless, the inter-governmental body, which sees itself as non-political, has remained optimistic about the situation and has so far refrained from imposing countermeasures while Iran mulls things over.

Islamic State Emboldened in Afghanistan

Farhan Zahid

From its establishment in September 2014, Islamic State’s arm in Afghanistan, its Khorasan province entity (IS-K), found itself the target of attacks by Afghan Taliban forces and strikes by the U.S. military in conjunction with the Afghan security forces. The group weathered significant losses and entrenched itself in the districts of eastern Afghanistan. In recent months, however, an improvement in relations with the Taliban has allowed it to focus on carrying out a series of bloody attacks.

Beginnings

Islamic State (IS) announced the establishment of its Khorasan *wilayat* (province)—covering the territories of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics—in September 2014, amid the backdrop of its capture of the Iraqi city of Mosul in June that year ([Dawn](#), November 13, 2014). The timing was fortuitous for the group, coming as factions of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were being squeezed into Afghanistan following the launch by the Pakistani military of its Zarb-e-Azb campaign. The operation targeted groups across the tribal areas of Pakistan, and many on-the-run Pakistani militants were more than happy to join hands with newly established IS-K in Afghanistan’s eastern provinces.

At least three Pakistani Islamist terrorist organizations that had been previously aligned with al-Qaeda—namely Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan, Jundullah and the TTP’s Shahidullah faction—pledged allegiance to IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (see: [Terrorism Monitor](#), October 24, 2014). In addition to these three groups, a number of jihadist commanders of other Islamist organizations also defected to IS-K. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), based in Afghanistan and previously affiliated to al-Qaeda, also joined the IS camp, pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi ([Gandhara](#), August 6, 2015). Chechen and Uighur Islamists followed suit.

This rapid development of IS-K shocked the high commands of Islamist militant organizations operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan, in particular those of the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. So successful did IS-K

appear, that al-Qaeda felt compelled to establish a new chapter—al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)—in order to remain relevant in the region. The Afghan Taliban leadership also took action, engaging in a bloody campaign against those siding with IS-K.

Initial Setbacks

From early on, IS-K struggled to put in place the appropriate leadership. Islamic State's central operations initially chose Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, a former Guantanamo inmate, but later replaced him with Abdul Rauf Khadim, who was subsequently killed by a U.S. drone strike in February 2015 ([Express Tribune](#), October 19, 2015). The next IS-K emir, Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai, had equally little time to strengthen IS-K. He too was killed in a drone strike, along with other militants, in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in July 2016 ([Friday Times](#), August 19, 2016).

It took IS some time to appoint Abdul Haseeb Logari, a former Afghan Taliban commander, as new emir of IS-K. He survived until in April 2017, when he too was killed, this time in a spectacular raid by U.S. and Afghan special forces in the Achin district of Nangarhar province, in which two U.S. soldiers were also killed ([Fortress](#), April 9, 2016).

While the U.S. strikes against IS-K in eastern Afghanistan have been intense and resulted in the killing of a number of IS-K commanders, as well as the overall leadership, the group has also come under attack from the Taliban. Unimpressed with the thought of losing ground to IS-K, the group began operations to reclaim areas in the eastern and southern districts of Afghanistan. The IMU was the initial target of the Taliban onslaught and was almost completely wiped out in an attack that also resulted in the freeing of Shahbaz Taseer, the kidnapped son of the governor of the Pakistani province of Punjab ([Pak Tribune](#), May 17, 2016). Taseer had been kidnapped by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Lahore in 2011 and handed over to IMU in Afghanistan. [1] According to Taseer, the Afghan Taliban forces routed the IMU militants and chased them down, sparing no one ([News International](#), March 12, 2016).

To an extent, IS-K had brought the Taliban actions on themselves as they had not only carved out territories from Taliban control, but also killed scores of Taliban fighters, inviting the wrath of a group that was local, bet-

ter established and more experienced at carrying out insurgency operations in Afghanistan.

Leadership Change

Over time, however, the Taliban's relationship with IS-K has changed. Following the death of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar in 2015, the Taliban shura selected Mullah Akhter Mansoor as the movement's new leader ([al Jazeera News](#), July 31, 2015). The loss of the legendary Mullah Omar in mysterious circumstances caused problems for the group, but Mansoor, a veteran Taliban leader, steered the movement into 2016, launching that year's spring offensive, Operation Omari.

Mansoor was unhappy with the emergence of IS-K in Afghanistan and waged a campaign against them. However, in October 2016, he was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan's Baluchistan province ([Dawn](#), May 22, 2016). The Taliban's new leader was named as Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, a former judge in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001) who appears to have adopted a more conciliatory stance towards IS-K.

Since taking control of the Taliban insurgency, he has attempted to reach a détente with IS-K while focusing his fighters' energies on the Afghan security forces and urban centers. This has allowed IS-K to consolidate, and the group has been further boosted by the arrival of foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria, fleeing the fall of IS' so-called caliphate there to find safe havens in un-governed (or poorly governed) territories in Afghanistan.

The change of leadership on both sides is the primary reason for the improved relationship between the Taliban and IS-K. After losing three of its leaders in drone strikes, IS-K has splintered into two factions. One faction is led by an Uzbek militant known as Mauvia, formerly of the IMU, who is based in the northern provinces of Afghanistan [2] The other, operating in southeastern provinces of Kunar, Paktika, Paktia, Logar, Khost and Nangarhar, is led by Aslam Farooqi, a former leader of the Pakistani Islamist terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). It is unclear whether Farooqi had relations with the Afghan Taliban leadership before joining IS-K. Since assuming command of his faction, however, he has shown himself willing and able to liaise with them.

For his part, Akhundzada has directed his Taliban fighters to refrain from attacking IS-K militants, resulting in a

de facto ceasefire. Akhundzada appears to see the goals of both IS-K and the Afghan Taliban as aligned ([Express Tribune](#), October 8, 2017). A series of agreements and peace accords have been signed over issues including the release of prisoners, taxation in respective areas of control and agreements to recognize each other's engagements with communities and businessmen. [3]

Although Mauvia's IS-K faction continues to attack the Taliban and the rift between the two is far from over, Akhundzada conciliatory approach has led to a pause in fighting between Taliban and IS-K militants in Afghanistan's southeastern provinces for the first time since the emergence of IS-K.

Gaining Momentum

IS-K's initial losses were considerable—it lost its first three emirs to U.S. drone strikes in just two years. However, the group was nevertheless able to maintain its rudimentary structure, and the eventual inflow of jihadists following the fall of the main IS operations in Iraq and Syria has paved the way for further development. A change in the leadership of the Afghan Taliban has allowed IS-K to consolidate, and Akhundzada, in the midst of this year's spring offensive, appears unwilling to risk rupturing relations with an entrenched IS-K and open up fighting on another front.

This presents a grave threat to an already embattled Afghanistan. The recent wave of Taliban terrorist attacks in urban centers across the country suggests a reinvigorated insurgency, with the Afghan government and security forces now also facing an onslaught from an emboldened IS-K.

Farhan Zahid writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamic State, jihadi ideologies and the Afghan Taliban.

NOTES

[1] Author discussions with a senior Islamabad based journalist (May 10, 2018).

[2] Antonio Giustozzi, "Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?", *Center for Research and Policy Analysis*, December 15, 2017.

[3] Ibid

Ansar al-Sunna: A New Militant Islamist Group Emerges in Mozambique

Sunguta West

A series of attacks by Muslim youth targeting villages in northern Mozambique has raised fears that a new Islamist militant group is gaining a foothold in East Africa. The group goes by the name Ansar al-Sunna, although locals refer to it as al-Shabaab after Somalia's al-Qaeda terror network affiliate whose activities it appears to emulate ([Intelligence Brief](#), June 4, 2018; [The East African](#), June 8, 2018).

In what is a troubling development for Mozambique, the group has focused its activities on Cabo Delgado, the country's northern-most province and a hub for mining and petroleum exploration, and has, according to some reports, brought a halt to development there.

Origins and Development

Ansar al-Sunna started as a religious organization in Cabo Delgado in 2015, according to media reports, and only later became militarized. Its early members were followers of Aboud Rogo Mohammed, the radical Kenyan cleric who was shot dead in 2012, possibly by the Kenyan security services. Continuing Rogo's work, the early Ansar al-Sunna members first settled in Kibiti, in southern Tanzania, before entering Mozambique ([The Standard](#), May 29; [Club of Mozambique](#), May 23). Cabo Delgado—with its large Muslim population, high youth unemployment and marginal economic development—provided a suitable environment for the militant group to grow its membership.

The emergence of Ansar al-Sunna could have serious consequences for Mozambique as Cabo Delgado is expected to become a center for gas production, following several promising discoveries. Since then, however, villages in the province have experienced sporadic attacks from the suspected Islamist militants ([The Standard](#), May 29). The group has taken control of mosques—or in some cases established its own—where members preach anti-state ideology and a radical interpretation of Islam ([Global Initiative](#), April 23). Civilians have fled their homes, and some now fear that the attacks will

disrupt gas production. Recent reports suggest that subcontractors for Anadarko, the oil firm leading the development efforts, had suspended work in Palma over security concerns (Zitamar news, June 8).

The group gained greater prominence in October 2017, when 30 gunmen attacked police units in Mocimboa da Praia, an Indian Ocean seaport in the Mozambique's north. The port is a border travel post for Tanzania and other parts of the district by the same name. In the attack, the gunmen targeted three police stations, including the district police command, a police post and a natural resources and environmental patrol police station. The gunmen occupied the town and stole ammunition from the stations, before they were forced out by government forces. In the fight, two police officers and at least 10 militants were killed. Assault rifles and documents in Arabic were discovered at the scene of the attack (Radio Shabelle, Oct 6, 2017).

Recent attacks have been increasingly vicious. On June 7, militants armed with knives and machetes killed five people in Namaluco village in Quissanga district. Days earlier, the militants hacked to death seven people in a nearby village (The Citizen, June 7). On May 27, the suspected militants killed 10 people in two small remote villages in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, near the border with Tanzania. The militants reportedly beheaded the victims, burnt homes and set vehicles ablaze (Cameroon Concorde News, May 29).

Structure and Finance

Ansar al-Sunna's radical interpretation of Islam is based on an ideology that was introduced to the region by young former expats who returned to the country having studied in Sudan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States (African Centre for Strategic Studies, March 25). It produced its first jihadist video in February, offering some insight into its motivations. The group appears intent on attempting to impose sharia across Mozambique. It opposes the government's secular education program and takes issue with co-ed education and has allegedly banned its members from seeking hospital treatment.

Its finances are generated through trafficking in illegal timber and rubies, another resource that is found in the province. By one estimate, the group generates at least \$3 million a year from trafficking in timber and \$30 mil-

lion from rubies, although these figures are likely exaggerated. [1]

Under-developed and largely ignored by the government, Cabo Delgado has also become a landing site for heroin shipments that are sent onward from the region to Europe and South Africa, according to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (Global Initiative, April 23). The group is likely also involved in the illicit trade in ivory and contraband goods, which would involve interaction with Tanzanians and other African, Chinese and Vietnamese nationals, with the revenues from these activities further boosting the militant group's finances.

Further funds likely come from sympathizers, who donate via electronic payments. The group's leaders use the money to boost recruitment and to meet travel expenses for its spiritual leaders, who travel within the province and on to Mocimboa da Praia and Tanzania (Club of Mozambique, May 23). It is believed Ansar al-Sunna leaders maintain religious, military and commercial links with fundamentalist groups in Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and the African Great Lakes Region. Radicalized youth in the country allegedly sell their property to finance trips to Somalia to train and wage jihad, although according to news reports, the group's militant training has been facilitated by members who have been forced out of the police (Club of Mozambique, May 23).

Recruitment has mainly been through family ties and radical mosques. Members of the militant group are identified by their distinct dress of white turbans, shaven heads, long beards and black shorts. They refuse to send their children to public schools and allegedly enter mosques wearing shoes and carrying weapons. The group's leaders allegedly shun dialogue with other Muslims.

The group has used jihadist videos similar to those used by radical movements in Africa to promote itself and radicalize its following. Its leaders have targeted poor, marginalized and unemployed youth, especially among the Kimwani, the smallest ethnic group in Cabo Delgado (Coast Week, June 12). In terms of organizational structure, the group is broken into cells, which allegedly enjoy relative autonomy.

Outlook

The emergence of Ansar al-Sunna is an indication that Islamist influence is spreading in East Africa. It is clear that this group has been at least inspired by the successes of al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya. It is also evident that the response adopted by the Mozambican government is similar to that adopted by Somalia against al-Shabaab and Nigeria's response to Boko Haram. In security operations launched in October 2017, the government responded to the attacks with an "iron fist," bombarding areas believed to be the militant's hideouts, closing down mosques (demolishing seven of them) and arresting hundreds of suspected militants ([All Africa](#), April 24).

It must be noted that Ansar al-Sunna is still a relatively young militant group. Analyzing reasons for the group's popularity and tackling concerns such as unemployment, exclusion and underdevelopment may help prevent it from spreading further. While this needs the involvement of the local community and government, involvement at the international level—how well Kenya controls the penetration of Islamists into Tanzania, and how Tanzania eliminates the route into Mozambique—will also determine what shape the group takes in future.

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[1] Pereira, Joao, Salvador Forquilha, and Saide Habibe. Islamic Radicalization in Mozambique: The Case of Mocimboa Da Praia, Report, 2017 (unavailable online).

'Security Belt': The UAE's Tribal Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen

Nicholas A. Heras

As international attention is focused on the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) led coalition's campaign to capture the strategic Yemeni port city of al-Hudaydah from the Ansar Allah (Partisans of God-Houthi) movement, the coalition continues to wage a war against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS) in several regions of southern Yemen. The UAE in particular has been quietly constructing an infrastructure of local Yemeni partner forces in southern Yemen, *al-Hizam al-Amni* (Security Belt), which is intended to provide a security architecture for stabilizing Emirati-controlled areas of southern Yemen and to provide a platform to stage operations against AQAP and IS (see: [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), June 6; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 4). This Emirati-led effort in southern Yemen is primarily mobilized from a carefully selected group of tribes, each powerful in their particular area of this region. Nevertheless, this project is controversial among south Yemenis and is contested by local forces loyal to the government of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi ([al-Araby al-Jadid](#), December 31, 2017; [al-Sharq](#) [Aden], November 11, 2017).

Co-Opting the Tribes

From the start of the UAE's participation in the coalition campaign, which began in March 2015, the Emiratis were focused on securing territory in southern Yemen and building a security infrastructure from which Emirati forces could operate. The UAE was aware that the largest and most important component of its local partner force in southern Yemen would be tribal militias, which would include soldiers from the Yemeni national army who had remained loyal to Hadi. [1] Most of these forces would be operating in their particular area or governorate, and would be mobilized from tribes that were generally smaller and less widely distributed than the large tribal confederations of northern Yemen. [2] Over the course of the first phase of the UAE's operations in southern Yemen, the Emiratis determined that the *al-Muqawama al-Janoobiyya* (Southern Resistance) organization was the best organized and had the broad-

est appeal to the tribes. The movement has for years called for independence for South Yemen and a return to the sovereign country of the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen that existed prior to the unification of Yemen that occurred from 1990-1994 (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 2, 2017; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 30, 2015; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), August 31, 2015).

The Southern Resistance organization provided the Emiratis with a ready-made network of tribal militias that were seeking foreign support to combat the Houthis and their allies in the security forces—those who had remained loyal to the former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh—and in some areas of southern Yemen, against AQAP and IS. With the focus on rolling back the Houthis out of Aden and other areas of southern Yemen, the Southern Resistance network created a good working partnership with the UAE military that would become the building blocks of the Security Belt as the Emiratis entered into the stabilization and entrenchment phase of their operations in southern Yemen. [3]

Although the UAE did not have a defined "tribal strategy" at the onset of its operations in southern Yemen, over the course of the first two years of the war, the UAE actively sought to develop an overarching approach to the region's tribes that could best exploit the local and provincial reach of the tribes and their militias and adapt to their relative willingness to mobilize. [4] This approach needed to fit into a security structure that could be utilized by the Hadi government and the Emirati and coalition military forces based in Aden, in order to secure and stabilize southern Yemen. [5] The operations that would be tasked to local Yemeni tribal partner forces included defending territory from the Houthis and their allies, seizing territory and holding it, and in some areas conducting operations against AQAP and IS and preventing the re-infiltration of these organizations into captured areas and into Aden. [6]

Relatively early into its campaign in Yemen, the UAE sought to establish a *modus vivendi* with the tribes, intending to form a partnership with them against common opponents, particularly the Houthis and AQAP and IS, and over time to develop a system of patronage that would bond the tribes under the authority of the Hadi government ([Khaleej Times](#) [Dubai], November 25, 2015; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 30, 2015). [7]

Officially, the Emiratis still recognize the Hadi government as the sovereign authority in southern Yemen. Over the course of its military operations in this region, however, the UAE has increasingly relied on its own unilateral efforts to engage with the tribes ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 4). For the UAE, this has been a process of active learning on how to build tribal support while operating in the conditions that are present in southern Yemen. The most important feature of that has been to adopt a province-by-province and area-by-area approach to recruiting and mobilizing tribal militias, allowing these forces to operate where they fight best—in their local areas ([Reuters](#), May 3, 2017). Reports also indicate that the national security policymaking leadership of the UAE is actively involved with the emerging Emirati tribal engagement strategy in southern Yemen. As an example, a senior member of the UAE's National Security Council recently met with the head of the tribal engagement office for Hadramawt governorate. Governorates such as the Hadramawt continue to be a core area of concern for the Emiratis because of AQAP's longstanding presence there, and the organization's close-knit relationship with some of Hadramawt's tribes ([al-Mandeb](#) [Aden], June 5).

The ongoing challenge for the Emiratis has been how to network these locally-focused tribal militias into a larger security force that can coordinate the collective defense of the wider, expanding UAE zone of influence in southern Yemen. [8] This requires a common unifying principle for dispersed and disparate tribal militias and has led the UAE away from unequivocally backing the Hadi government, which is not so far removed from the *ancien régime* under Saleh. The Hadi government still grapples with unpopularity in many areas of southern Yemen, and is unable to stem support for the southern independence movement ([Raseef](#) [Aden], January 30, 2018; [al-Sharq](#) [Aden], November 11, 2017). As a result, the UAE has built a network of local partner forces throughout southern Yemen, most of which are loyal to the Southern Resistance and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) led by Major General 'Aidaros Qasim Abd al-Aziz al-Zubaydi, and which is actively seeking to achieve independence for South Yemen (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 2, 2017).

It is from this network of tribal, STC-linked militias that the UAE has been building its Security Belt, an organization that has been increasingly tasked with combating the spread of AQAP and IS in southern Yemen (see [Mili-](#)

[tant Leadership Monitor](#), June 6; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 4). This mission has become more important as both Salafist-jihadist organizations have been infiltrating Aden and conducting attacks targeting the Emirati and coalition forces in the city ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 4). AQAP still represents a significant and active threat to the Emirati-led coalition forces and the stability of several governorates in southern Yemen, including in Aden, Lahij, Abyan, Ibb, Hadramawt and Shabwa. The UAE is responding to this threat by increasing the scope and seriousness of its tribal engagement activities in these governorates, and by developing component "elite forces," drawn from local tribes in particularly sensitive and problematic areas, such as Shabwa and Hadramawt, and integrating them into the Security Belt architecture ([Aden Gad](#), August 5; [Southern Transitional Council](#), August 1, 2017). These elite forces are being trained directly by the Emiratis and are being deployed in raids to capture high-value AQAP leadership figures, key infrastructure such as oil wells and to seize areas from AQAP ([al-Omana](#), November 2, 2017; [al-Ain](#), August 3, 2017).

Elite Forces

Shabwa governorate has been a particularly important proving ground for the UAE, and (working through the Emiratis) the United States, to test out the elite forces concept. Energy-rich Shabwa, which is the site of significant foreign energy corporation investment and contains Yemen's only working gas terminal at the port of Belhaf, has also been a key area of recruitment and control for AQAP. Working through the Shabwa Elite Forces, the Hadrami (Hadramawt) Elite Forces and other allied militias, the UAE and the United States conducted an extensive and successful campaign against AQAP in July and August 2017 ([Military Times](#), August 4, 2017; [Reuters](#), August 3, 2017).

Since the late summer 2017 campaign, the Shabwa Elite Forces have been responsible for stability and counterterrorism operations in the governorate ([Gulf News](#) [Dubai], April 29; [Sky News Arabia](#) [Abu Dhabi], February 26; [Sky News Arabia](#) [Abu Dhabi], November 27, 2017). Their recruitment started in the summer of 2016, beginning with a core group of specific tribes—Bel'abeed, Bani Hilal, Balharath and al-Wahadee—that were reportedly closely vetted by the Emiratis and mobilized with the support of the United States ([Yemen](#)

[Shabab](#) [Ataq], August 12, 2017; [al-Yemeny al-Gadeed](#) [Aden], June 23, 2016).

This force was designed to be a pan-tribal, local militia that reported directly to the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition (i.e. the UAE) and could protect high value targets, such as energy resources, and conduct operations directly against AQAP and IS ([Okaz](#) [Riyadh], January 10; [Al-Mowaten](#) [Aden], August 4, 2017). The Shabwa Elite Forces support the STC, and in clashes in Aden between forces loyal to the Hadi government and those loyal to the STC, they have sided with the separatists ([Tahdeeth](#) [Aden], January 28).

Storing Up Trouble

The UAE initiative, however, has not been without consequences and resulting challenges, including how to prevent the return and infiltration of AQAP, how to provide security for suspicious tribes, and how to navigate the existential political question of southern Yemen's future relationship with the Hadi government ([Akhbar Yemen](#) [Aden], May 26; [al-Bayan](#) [Dubai], February 26; [al-Arabiyya](#) [Dubai], January 30). The Shabwa Elite Forces have been linked to arbitrary arrests and campaigns of intimidation targeting the powerful al-Awlaq tribe, believed to be the most numerous in the governorate, as well as conducting aggressive raids that have led to deaths and caused tensions with other tribes in the governorate, such as the Bifatima al-Na'mani ([Masa Press](#) [Aden], March 29; [Masa Press](#), August 12, 2017; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 30, 2015). Since the beginning of its operations, the UAE has courted and worked with the al-Awlaq against the Houthis, but it also has a fraught relationship with this powerful tribe regarding the al-Awlaq's relationship to AQAP ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 30, 2015).

Ongoing tensions with the al-Awlaq, which are viewed with suspicion for being closely tied to AQAP, are an indication of the stress factors that the UAE engenders when it empowers certain tribes in its proxy forces, which then target other tribes in their home areas ([Yemen Shabab](#) [Ataq], August 12, 2017; [al-Mashreq](#), August 11, 2017). The adversarial relationship between the Shabwa Elite Forces and the al-Awlaq tribe has led to accusations from opponents of the UAE in southern Yemen that the Emiratis are purposely pitting tribes against each other in order to maintain overall control

([al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], January 25; [al-Sharq](#) [Aden], November 11, 2017).

As a result of its relationship with the Emiratis and the United States, the Shabwa Elite Forces have generated a significant amount of controversy within their home governorate, as well as in the wider context of the social and political dynamics of southern Yemen ([YouTube](#), August 6, 2017). As a proxy of the UAE in the governorate, they have become a target of, and symbol for, a persistent sentiment of dissatisfaction with the Emiratis, the local forces they have mobilized and the Emirati administration of southern Yemen, among some of the region's tribes ([Golden News](#) [Aden], December 2, 2017; [Yemen Shabab](#) [Ataq], August 12, 2017; [Emirati Affairs](#), August 11, 2017).

This emerging narrative is dangerous for the Emirati strategy in southern Yemen, and demonstrates the challenges of operating in a politically divided region that has a celebrated history of fighting against foreign occupation. One aspect of this narrative is that the UAE zone in southern Yemen is being used as a permissive space for U.S. counterterrorism operations against Salafist-jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda and IS. The increase in both the presence of U.S. forces in southern Yemen and the operational tempo of the American military against AQAP targets in southern Yemen in coordination with the Emirati forces is a delicate subject for many of the tribes in Yemen's south. Civilian casualties that result from these U.S. and joint U.S.-UAE operations creates problems for the Emiratis with some of the directly affected tribes, such as al-Awlaq, because the UAE is viewed as the actor who invited the United States into southern Yemen and is therefore responsible for its actions ([Masa Press](#), August 27, 2017; [Masa Press](#), August 12, 2017).

The second aspect of this narrative is that some of the tribes in southern Yemen perceive the Emiratis as a foreign power that, while a brother Arab nation, is acting in a manner that resembles how the British Empire historically administered South Yemen from Aden. Like the British before them, the Emiratis are purposely designing a security regime that plays tribes in southern Yemen against each other and creates proxy tribal forces ([al-Arabi al-Jadid](#), November 22, 2017; [al-Yemeny al-Gadeed](#) [Aden], June 23, 2016). The perceived motive being to control southern Yemen's key resources, such as its strategically located ports and energy resources

such as in Shabwa governorate ([YouTube](#), August 21, 2017; [al-Nahar](#) [Beirut], August 7, 2017). As a result, there has been a slowly simmering protest campaign against the UAE administration in southern Yemen (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), June 6). These tensions have reached the point that a sitting member of the Hadi government, Transport Minister Saleh al-Jabwani, publically asserted that the UAE was a bad actor. In public comments made in response to a question about the role of the Shabwa Elite Forces in street battles, al-Jabwani said that the UAE was trying to break up the country by supporting militias that are trying to create an independent South Yemen ([al-Arabi al-Jadid](#), February 26).

Outlook

The Emiratis are aware that they are in competition with other state and non-state actors for the cooperation and potential loyalty of southern Yemeni tribes. The Security Belt apparatus, and the various elite forces that are components of it, are designed to create an overarching structure of patronage and support that extends from a definable center, in Aden.

This approach is designed to be strategic, fitting tribes in far-flung governorates in southern Yemen into a larger infrastructure of support that is operated from a central command. The Security Belt apparatus is designed to take local tribal militias on a region by region basis in southern Yemen and subordinate them under a force that is a platform for working with the Emirati military. The idea is to construct a type of order among the tribes of southern Yemen, while also incentivizing their cooperation with Aden and Abu Dhabi.

However, there are challenges to the Emirati strategy, in particular the rising discontent within southern Yemen toward the UAE's role in the region. Competitors to the UAE and its partner forces could weaponize this discontent, oppose the Emirati presence and frustrate the UAE's tribal engagement strategies. Likely competitors include a mix of local Yemeni opponents to the UAE and its strategic project in southern Yemen, such as rebellious tribes in the region, as well as forces loyal to the Hadi government, AQAP and IS, and other Arab Gulf states, including allied countries Saudi Arabia and Oman, which both have different perspectives on the future of Yemen.

The success of the UAE's Security Belt project will determine the viability of a long-term Emirati military presence based in southern Yemen, and the Emirati role as a regional powerbroker, in regard to south Yemen's stability. That in itself will be determined by the UAE's effort to mobilize local tribes against AQAP and IS, which are actively targeting the Emirati project in southern Yemen.

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NOTES

[1] Author's interview with an adviser to the UAE National War College who contributed to the UAE stabilization and counterinsurgency strategy in Yemen. Interview conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on February 26, 2016.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Author's interview with an adviser to the UAE National War College who contributed to the UAE stabilization and counterinsurgency strategy in Yemen. Interview conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on May 8, 2017.

[4] Author's interview with an adviser to the UAE National War College who contributed to the UAE stabilization and counterinsurgency strategy in Yemen. Interview conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on February 26, 2016.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Author's interview with an adviser to the UAE National War College who contributed to the UAE stabilization and counterinsurgency strategy in Yemen. Interview conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on May 8, 2017.

[7] Author's interview with an adviser to the UAE National War College who contributed to the UAE stabilization and counterinsurgency strategy in Yemen. Interview conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on February 26, 2016.

[8] Author's interview with an adviser to the UAE National War College who contributed to the UAE stabilization and counterinsurgency strategy in Yemen. Interview conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on May 8, 2017.