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LIBYA: FOREIGN POWERS KEEP MILITIAS WELL SUPPLIED

Alexander Sehmer

Libyan General Khalifa Haftar handed back control of four key oil ports—Ras Lanuf, Es Sider, Zueitina and Hariga—to the National Oil Corporation (NOC) this month, ending a crisis that had seen the country's crude production cut by 850,000 barrels per day (al-Jazeera, July 11). Although now resolved, the situation highlights once again how foreign interests are keeping Libya divided.

The oil standoff with Haftar came about after his Libyan National Army (LNA) recaptured Ras Lanuf and Es Sider from a rival militia in mid-June and attempted to funnel oil exports through the rouge "NOC East," a breakaway part of the national oil company headquartered in Benghazi (Asharq al-Awsat, June 27).

The LNA chief's climb-down appears to have come without concessions from the government in Tripoli. Some attribute it to a letter from U.S. President Donald Trump to Haftar's backers in the House of Representatives in Tobruk, threatening legal action if the crisis went unresolved (Libya Observer, July 11). More likely it reflects the difficulties of exporting the oil, which under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2146 can only be done through the NOC.

This is one area where the UN has had some success. Security Council Resolutions banning the supply of arms and military equipment, on the other hand, are routinely flouted (Libya Herald, June 19, 2017). Just this month authorities at the port of al-Khums east of Tripoli seized a vessel that was allegedly delivering weapons from Qatar. The LNA announced it would investigate the suspected arms shipment, which was supposedly dressed up as a delivery of wheat (Asharq al-Awsat, July 11).

Haftar has his own strong backing from abroad—in particular the United Arab Emirates (UAE), along with Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Libya Herald, July 8, 2017). Plenty of evidence indicates that the UAE has violated the arms embargo on Libya to supply the LNA with weapons (Libya Observer, June 10, 2017; Daily Sabah, June 11, 2017). The suspicion is that the UAE intended to help Haftar export oil from the east as a way of funding his operation (Wall Street Journal, July 13; MEMO, July 16).

The move is another demonstration of how the split between Qatar and the Arab quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt is filtering into conflicts around the region. Ibrahim Jadhran, whose forces were the ones to earlier briefly seize the oil ports from Haftar, is thought to be backed by Qatar. Although Jadhran insists he is loyal to Libya's UN-backed Presidential Council, and that under his control the oil ports could remain open, the Presidential Council chairman, Fayez al-Sarraj, declared his forces illegitimate (Libya Observer, June 17).

Units from his Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG)—which controlled the oil terminals between 2011 and 2016—have turned up in the Qatar-supported Benghazi Defense Brigade (BDB), which has been unable to shake its links to hardline Islamists (Libya Herald, March 3, 2017). Meanwhile, his brother, Osama Jadhran, is accused of passing PFG weaponry to Islamic State (Alwasat, June 19, 2017). The influence of foreign powers behind the scenes in Libya's conflict remains as divisive as ever.

YEMEN: KEEPING THE COUNTRY DIVIDED

Alexander Sehmer

The killing of a politically connected Islamic preacher in the port city of Aden has sparked fears of a coordinated campaign of assassinations, and highlighted operational differences in the Saudi-led coalition now mired in the Yemen conflict.

Unidentified gunmen shot and killed Mohammed Ragheb on July 21 at a mosque in Aden's Mualla neighborhood, according to local media reports (Aden al-Ghad, July 21). Ragheb was supposedly close to the Yemeni Congregation for Reform party, known as the al-Islah party, the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. His death follows a spate of similar killings that have targeted imams and al-Islah officials in Aden, and prompted worshipers to take greater security precautions (Aden al-Ghad, July 22).

Some rumors suggest that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is behind the killings. Reports in Iranian media accuse the UAE of forming assassination committees in various Yemeni cities, including Aden, to target Houthis and high-ranking al-Islah party members (PressTV, June 26). The UAE has been accused by rights groups of running informal detention centers where abuses were rife (allegations Abu Dhabi rejects), while local militias it supports are accused of involvement in torture and enforced disappearances (New Arab, July 12; The National, July 8).

Al-Islah is allied with President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, whose government (set up in Aden since coalition troops recaptured the city in 2015) the Saudi-led coalition forces are seeking to reinstate. The coalition appears not entirely united on this point. The UAE places less stock in Hadi and has a lower tolerance for al-Islah than does Saudi Arabia (see Terrorism Monitor, April 23). Part of the tension comes from the connection to the Muslim Brotherhood, to which the UAE is implacably opposed. Perhaps conscious of that, al-Islah has tried to distance itself from the group, saying it has "no organizational or political ties" to the Brotherhood (Gulf News, January 9).

The differing strategies and paucity of common purpose within the coalition saw fighters with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) take on Hadi loyal-

ists in January (Arab News, January 28; al-Jazeera, January 28). Nonetheless, the UAE has proved its effectiveness on the ground, recapturing areas held by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), including the southern port of Mukalla in 2016, and steadily re-taking Shabwa and towns in Hadramawt province with the help of U.S. intelligence (The National, March 25).

The success of the UAE's counter-terrorism operations in the south against AQAP and Islamic State, however, has involved training and arming thousands of tribal fighters, frequently empowering groups that share its hostility towards al-Islah. In the longer term, the move risks fostering instability and leaving the country even more divided.

Iran Ramps Up Support to Taliban in Western Afghanistan

Abubakar Siddique

During an official visit to Iran in May, Tariq Shah Bahrami, Afghanistan's defense minister, received assurances that Tehran was fully committed to helping Kabul fight terrorism. It was a welcome guarantee, coming as Afghan forces faced a fresh onslaught from the Taliban, which typically mounts an annual offensive in April. Within months, however, the promise appeared to ring hollow as Afghan officials increasingly blamed Iran for the fighting in Afghanistan's western Farah province.

A Common Enemy

Speaking after his meeting with Bahrami on May 13, Iranian Army Chief of Staff Mohammad Hossein Baqeri declared that Tehran and Kabul shared a common purpose.

"The shared backgrounds between the two countries of Iran and Afghanistan, including religion and language, have brought them together in such a way that no obstacle can undermine their close relations, especially in combatting the terrorist groups," he said (Khaama Press, May 13).

However, as Bahrami gathered assurances and pledges of support from the clerical regime's senior officials in Tehran, a battle was brewing along the nearly 1,000 kilometer-long border between the countries. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Taliban fighters descended on the western city of Farah, which serves as the capital of the rural Farah province.

Heavily armed Taliban fighters breached Farah's defenses in the early hours of May 15. By mid-day, they had overrun large swathes of the town, torched several government building and killed and captured government soldiers, policemen and pro-government militia members.

"The incompetent defense minister, the head of the Directorate of National Security [the Afghan secret service] and Mr. President, the residents of Farah are utterly dis-

appointed with you because we were nearly overrun by Iranian and Pakistani spies," said Humayon Shahzada, a militia member who fought in the battle (Tolo News, May 15).

In Kabul, Afghan interior ministry spokesman Najib Danish was more diplomatic. "What happened today has foreign links but it's still not clear which country is involved," he said.

The clashes continued well into the following day, even after Afghan officials claimed to have repulsed the Taliban attack by sending in special forces troops and calling on NATO airpower.

Iranian Influence

Provincial Governor Abdul Basir Salangi claimed that more than 300 Taliban fighters were killed in the fighting, but local lawmakers, residents, and security officials said that Taliban fighters emerged from hiding to mount a fresh attack on Afghan security forces late on May 16 (Gandhara RFE/RL, May 17). Most officials, however, pointed to a foreign hand orchestrating the fighting, and many believe that lying behind this violence is not ideology but control of local resources.

"The construction of the Bakhshabad dam in Farah and the construction of 'golden lines' such as the TAPI [the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India] gas pipeline that goes through three Farah districts are not acceptable to our neighbor," Governor Salangi told journalists, in what was a clear reference to Iran (Tolo News, May 16).

A provincial police chief, Fazel Ahmad Sherzad, was more explicit. "Iran directly interferes … insecurity in Farah is in the interest of Iran … Iran is fully funding and equipping the Taliban in Farah," he said (1TV News, May 16).

Senior Afghan officials, as well as General John Nicholson, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, appear to back these assertions coming from Farah. During a May 19 visit to the province, Afghan interior and defense ministers, the Afghan spy chief and General Nicholson listened to angry local leaders who demanded accountability and blamed Iran for the attacks. Last year, senior Afghan military officials claimed to have evidence that Iran was providing weapons to the Taliban in western provinces bordering Iran.

Water War

Without naming Iran, Defense Minister Bahrami made it absolutely clear that Kabul sees Tehran behind the unrest. "Farah's war is an absolute and a precise war over water management," he said. "Since Salma dam completion [in the neighboring Herat Province], and an early work launch on Bakhshabad dam, we have been in this hostility, but it is our right to manage our water," Bahrami emphasized (Pajhwok News, May 20).

Water appears to be one of the factors prompting Tehran's Shia clerical regime to now support Afghanistan's hardline Sunni Taliban movement, despite nearly going to war against it in the 1990s.

"We cannot remain indifferent to the issue [water dams], which is apparently damaging our environment," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared last year. "Construction of several dams in Afghanistan, such as Kajaki, Kamal Khan, Salma, and others in the north and south of Afghanistan, affect our Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces," he said (Gandhara RFE/RL, July 31, 2017).

Back in late 2001, Tehran had welcomed and supported the U.S.-led military operation that toppled the Taliban regime. As most NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan in late 2014, Tehran recalibrated its approach and began extending covert support to the Taliban. The emergence of Islamic State (IS) militants in Afghanistan in 2015 cemented this alliance to an extent that the Taliban leader, Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, was killed in a U.S. airstrike in southwestern Pakistan in May 2016, as he returned from visiting Iran.

Mansur had publicly warned IS against operating in Afghanistan in 2015. It is not a coincidence that IS was never able to establish a foothold in Afghan provinces bordering Iran. Later that year, Mohammad Reza Behrami, Iran's envoy in Kabul, acknowledged that Tehran maintains contacts with the Taliban but insisted that the two do not have a "real relationship" (Tasnim News Agency, December 20, 2016).

In a May 19 interview with Afghanistan's private Ariana News TV, Behrami acknowledged that Tehran has contacts with the Taliban but rejected that his country sup-

ported the fighting in Farah. "In general, we oppose the [United States'] presence in any of the Islamic countries. It has been clear and we have already announced it," he said (Ayrana News, May 19). "Regarding Afghanistan, we respect the decisions taken by Afghanistan officials. We have reached an agreement with Afghan authorities that our respective territory will not be used against each other."

He insisted that all of Tehran's contacts with the Taliban are aimed at supporting Kabul's efforts to negotiate peace with the insurgents. "All regional countries have such contacts [with the Taliban] ... No country has severed this contact. It is because all of us want to play a positive and constructive role ... But a few points should be adhered to in the efforts [to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table]. First, the government of Afghanistan is the main pivot. [Second], government-to-government ties should not be affected. Third, the negotiations should be between the government and others," Behrami said (Ayrana News, May 19).

Tehran's role in the Taliban operations in western Afghanistan, however, appears to have divided the movement's leadership. Abdul Qayum Zakir, the former top Taliban military commander, was one of the first Taliban leaders to have visited Iran to establish a covert relationship with Tehran (Jamestown, June 2015). But in a recent pamphlet attributed to him, he criticized the Farah offensive, declaring it to be an independent initiative of Mullah Manan Liwanai, the Taliban commander in neighboring Helmand province, and one that had not been approved by the movement's leadership.

"The recent clashes, which happened in Farah, have caused huge casualties on the mujahideen [Taliban], and this willful action was carried out by the Taliban's governor for Helmand, Mullah Manan Liwani," the pamphlet said (Arman-e Milli, translated by BBC Monitoring, May 27).

Outlook

Kabul sees Tehran's influence behind the recent clashes in Afghanistan's Farah province, with Iran working the Taliban to its advantage to secure control of local resources, particularly water.

It is likely that the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May has given Tehran an added incentive to support the Taliban in Afghanistan, in the hope of putting further pressure on Washington.

Going forward, Tehran's Shia clerical regime and Afghanistan's Sunni Taliban insurgents are unlikely to strike a long-term viable strategic alliance, but covert cooperation between the two is expected to play a role in fomenting insecurity in western and southern Afghanistan, while posing a continued threat to the U.S. and NATO military presence in the country.

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Is Islamic State Making Plans for a Comeback in Iraq?

Rafid Jaboori

Dozens of people have been killed in a series of attacks launched by Islamic State (IS) in locations north of Baghdad over the past few months, prompting fears that the terrorist group is reconstituting itself in parts of Iraq (al-Hadath, March 28; al-Sumaria, July 1).

IS has lost all of its urban strongholds in Iraq, including Mosul, which it occupied in June 2014 and which was reclaimed by Iraqi forces last year with significant U.S. support. However, the recent surge in IS activity indicates that the group is now pursuing its old hit-and-run tactics in Iraq, and serves to illustrate how IS could exploit the divisions that remain among Iraqi factions.

Shia Anger and a Resurgent IS

The recent IS operations culminated in a bloody, high-profile attack that caught the nation's attention. A group of IS fighters kidnapped six Shia men on June 23, showing them in a video and giving the Iraqi government a three-day ultimatum to release Sunni women in Iraqi prisons, or the men would be killed (Sky News Arabia, June 23). The government refused to negotiate and the bodies of the men were found once the deadline had expired, prompting outrage in Shia areas (urdoni.com, June 27).

This anger was not directed against Sunnis, as happened during the worst years of sectarian violence between 2005 and 2007. Iraq's Sunni communities have in any case become weaker and more submissive since the IS saga, and there are fewer mixed areas in Iraq. Instead, the collective Shia rage was directed against the government of Haider al-Abadi, the Iraqi prime minister, for the way it handled the incident. Abadi, a perceived moderate Shia who enjoys overwhelming support from the United States, responded by ordering the launch of military operations and a new strategy that targets IS cells and tracks them to their hiding places (al-Ittihad, June 29).

The government's new strategy, however, is facing significant challenges. After 2014, Iraqi troops could rely on the backing of the United States and other Western allies in terms of aerial images, intelligence support and military planning. When IS was in control of big cities and urban areas, their movement was easier to detect and military operations against the group had larger and clearer targets. Since the security forces recaptured Mosul and liberated other cities and towns across Iraq—announcing a final victory over IS in December—IS survivors retreated to the Hamrin Mountains, from where they now operate (Rudaw, August 7, 2017). Hamrin extends in the provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk and Saladin, and it is now far less easy to locate and target IS groups.

The Iraqi forces should have expected such a move. The forerunner to IS, the Islamic State of Iraq, similarly retreated to the Hamrin Mountains after being weakened by Iraqi forces and the U.S.-backed Sunni Sahwa (Awakening) fighters in 2007 and 2008.

Reconfiguring and Adapting

Analysts had speculated that IS would take a step back and become a more conventional insurgent group after its territorial losses. That assumption appears correct, but the situation requires further analysis.

In April, an editorial appeared in the IS weekly newspaper *al-Nabaa* that referred to a vow by the group's previous leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, to make Iraq a "university of jihad" that would train Islamist extremists. Abu Omar, who was killed by a U.S. airstrike in April 2010, was the first leader of Islamic State in Iraq, ahead of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The reference to Abu Omar and his statement, made during a difficult period for IS as it was driven into retreat by the U.S.-backed Awakening movement, is meant to inspire the group's followers reminding them how the group eventually staged a spectacular return after near-defeat. The *al-Nabaa* article also recalls the memories of the field leaders who led the charge to take Mosul and other cities in 2014 and claims that such a move could happen again at any time. [1]

While most of the recent attacks have been on relatively small targets, IS carried out a number of larger operations against Iraqi forces and Shia militias in Saladin province in May and June. These challenge the Iraqi authorities' claim that the situation in Iraq is stable and back under the government's control. IS claims that the Iraqi armed forces, rebuilt by the United States after the 2003 invasion, have become more like an unruly gang.

While the IS assessment is inaccurate, it should be taken seriously.

A big part of the Iraqi military success has depended on the Popular Mobilization Units, an umbrella of Shia militias backed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Unlike the previous Sahwa fighters groups, which was a U.S. military initiative to organize local Sunnis against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and later IS in Iraq, local Sunni tribesmen who want to fight IS now do so under the auspices of the PMU. That puts them under the command and influence of the Shia militias (Baghdad News, November 5, 2016). IS' attempt to play on this is meant to tap into the grievances of the poorest and most disfranchised segments of the Iraqi Sunni community.

Iraq's Shia Strengthened

A series of defeats and miscalculations has weakened the Sunni rejectionist movement, which represented a challenge to the U.S. military and the post-invasion Shia-led government. The Iraqi Sunni community in general was appalled by the harsh policies IS imposed on Sunni locals who fell under its rule and the devastation caused by the military campaigns to retake control of the cities and towns the group held.

That situation silenced many voices who were critical of the measures of the Shia armed groups or political parties. Tribesmen joined the PMU, but so too Sunni political parties and politicians have come increasingly under the influence of Shia parties. The Sunni rejectionist movement is now far weaker than it was after the invasion. Still the Sunni resentment will always form the main driver of recruitment for IS. The slow pace—or sometimes complete lack—of reconstruction in the cities that suffered heavy damage in the fight against IS is a hindrance to developing trust between the people and the government. There are also worrying reports on corruption within local government and the security forces (al-Khaleej, February 23, 2017).

Another division in Iraq that continues to prevent the defeat of IS is the rift between the Baghdad government and the Kurds. The operation to retake the city of Hawijah in the racially mixed Kirkuk province was one of the last operations against IS in the cities (arabi21.com, October 4, 2017). It was also the last time Iraqi military units coordinated military efforts with the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Kurds watched as the Sunni-Shia divide led to the rise of IS and saw an opportunity to use their U.S.-backed military efforts against the group as an opportunity to fulfill their dream of independence.

Both Baghdad and Washington disapproved of the move, while Iran and Turkey are implacably opposed to it (*Asharq al-Awsat*, September 22, 2017). The Kurds, however, insisted on holding an independence referendum. The overwhelming majority voted for independence as expected, but there was no way to turn that outcome into a reality (al-Arabiya, September 27, 2017). The Abadi government took advantage of the Kurds' miscalculations and the regional and U.S. disapproval for the referendum. In a matter of days, Iraqi forces had seized Kirkuk and all the disputed areas that the Kurds controlled after IS expansion (al-Hurra, October 18, 2017).

Seeking Former Glory

Abadi enjoyed a temporary rise in his popularity among both Sunni and Shia communities for his move against the Kurds. It was a rare unifying cause and the Kurds appear to have bowed following their military setback. However, the relations and coordination in the efforts against IS were detrimentally affected. In his comment on the recent IS attacks—many of which took place on the Baghdad-Kirkuk highway, which leads to Kurdistan further north—Abadi accused the Kurds of tipping off IS on the movement of the six victims. He added that with government troops on one side of the Hamrin Mountains and the Kurds on the other, the area had become a no-man's land which had effectively provided a safe space for IS. [2] The situation was likely exacerbated by poor coordination and intelligence sharing.

The new pattern of IS operations might indicate that the group has returned to the past tactics of its insurgency in Iraq, but that is not the full picture. Despite the heavy military setbacks, IS remains ambitious. In its propaganda, it aims to build on the legacy of the days when it controlled territory and its fighters occupied cities in Iraq and Syria.

The Iraqi government must address the root causes of IS and the possibility of it making another advance. The government should also not assume that the support from the United States, which it frequently calls on, will always be forthcoming. At any rate, military campaigns

alone will not be enough to defeat IS, without introducing genuine normalization measures, reconciliation and good governance.

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NOTES

[1] Al-Nabaa, issue 128 (April 20)

[2] Abadi's remarks were made during a meeting of the Iraqi joint military command on June 28 and aired on various TV stations (YouTube, June 29).

Morocco Flexes Its Muscles Over Western Sahara: An Analysis of Rabat's Standoff with Tehran

Meaghan Koudelka and Peter Sandby-Thomas

On May 1, the Kingdom of Morocco made the dramatic step of severing all political ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran and withdrawing its ambassador from Tehran. The Moroccan government claimed to have evidence of Iranian support for the Polisario Front, the separatist group that has been seeking independence for Western Sahara since 1975 (al-Arabiya, May 1). The decision was, according to Morocco's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita, the result of Iran providing military training and supplying weapons to Polisario fighters through its proxy, Hezbollah. "Hezbollah's actions seek to undermine Moroccan interests and constitute an attack on the country's territorial integrity," Bourita said (Morocco World News, May 1). The identification of Iran and Hezbollah also implicated Algeria. The Polisario is based in Tindouf, in Algeria's southwest, and the coordination of these contacts was said to have been done through the Iranian embassy in Algiers. [1] Moreover, Morocco had made explicit accusations the previous month alleging similar types of activity by Algeria (Hespress, March 30).

This is not the first time Rabat has broken ties with Tehran. There have been long-standing tensions between the two states dating back to when Morocco hosted the exiled Shah of Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and its support for Iraq in its war with Iran. More recently, Morocco cut diplomatic relations in 2009 because of claims the Iranian embassy in Rabat was spreading Shiism in the country. Relations only resumed in 2014 at the request of Iran (al-Arabiya, May 1). According to Moroccan officials, this most recent decision was taken in the interests of the country's national security: Iran and Hezbollah were attempting to use the Polisario as a proxy force to attack Morocco via southwest Algeria and across the UN buffer zones.

Who is the Polisario Front?

The Sahrawi Liberation Army, known more commonly as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro—and particularly as the Polisario Front—was formed in 1973 by a group of Saharans who were living in exile in Zuerat, Mauritania. [2] At this time, the areas of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro were under Spanish rule but were also claimed by Morocco as part of "Greater Morocco" (descended from the Sherfian Empire) and by Mauritania, as part of "Ensemble Mauritanien." By contrast, the aim of the Polisario Front was to create the independent state of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) on the territory of the Western Sahara for the Sahrawi people. The signing of the "Madrid Accords" by Spain and Morocco in 1975 legalized the withdrawal of the colonial power and permitted the territory's annexation by Morocco. This development marked the beginning of a violent conflict between Morocco and the Polisario that remains unresolved to this day. [3] A ceasefire in 1991, overseen by MINURSO (the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), has brought about a significant reduction in hostilities and largely resulted in a stalemate that sees Morocco control the western part (up to the Sand Wall defense it built from 1986-1990) and the Polisario control the eastern section (see map).

However, today the political question appears no closer to a resolution. At issue is the referendum to determine the fate of the territory, with the particular points of contention being who is eligible to vote in the referendum—Sahrawis from the territory prior to Morocco's annexation and their descendants, or all those living there now—and what options should be available to those voting—independence, as favored by the Polisario, or autonomy, as preferred by Morocco.

Despite SADR being recognized by 32 states, Morocco has used its greater political clout at the UN to push for an autonomy plan since 2007, a move that has received the support and endorsement of major powers, the United States chief among them. This autonomy plan is appealing because the viability of an independent Sahrawi state is uncertain, given that it is surrounded by much larger neighboring countries and largely reliant on two resources (fish and phosphates). Indeed, the concern is that SADR, if formed, would likely become either a vassal state under the control of Algeria or Iran, or a failed state that could become a haven for terrorist groups. [4]

Indeed, the terrorist threat has increased markedly in recent years, with first the appearance of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) spreading out from Algeria, and then the emergence of Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in nearby Mali (Morocco On The Move, June, 2014). Links between these groups and the Polisario have been recorded. In 2011, Polisario members were implicated in the kidnapping of three Western aid workers from one of its camp in Tindouf on behalf of AQIM. The three were held for nine months.

In 2012, the Polisario was accused of participating in drug and aid trafficking between Mauritania, Mali and Algeria. In the same year, new recruits from Tindouf were also reported to be involved with AQIM and the MUJAO in northern Mali. [5] Then again in 2012 Mauritania reported a series of security threats from terrorist groups linked to AQIM, the Polisario Front and Boko Haram. Meanwhile, a number of reports have suggested that the Tindouf refugee camps have become a recruiting ground for these larger terrorist organizations, as well as a hub for trafficking arms across the Sahel, and drugs into Europe. Most recently, the U.S. State Department moved to designate Islamic State in the Greater Sahara as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and its leader, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT). Al-Sahrawi is a former Polisario leader. This development suggests that the terrorist threat is unlikely to diminish in this region in the near future and the fate of the Western Sahara will likely play a pivotal role.

The Credibility of the Moroccan Accusations

For their part, both Hezbollah and the Iranian embassy in Algeria have denied all Moroccan accusations regarding support for the Polisario, and insisted they have no connection with the group (al-Jazeera, May 2). Bahram Ghasemi, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson, told local media that the allegations were completely baseless and that there was no evidence: "In their meeting with the foreign minister of our country [and] in their interviews with different media outlets, the authorities of this country [Morocco] did not present any conclusive evidence to prove their claims" (Morocco World News, May 16).

For its part, Polisario also denied receiving any assistance from Iran, with its spokesperson Muhammed Hadded requesting that the Moroccan government produce evidence showing the links between Iran and the Western Sahara movement (Mehr, May 2). Algeria has also publicly rebutted the accusations, releasing a statement on May 13 stating that "[i]nstead of submitting the 'irrefutable' evidence that he claims he holds, which really does not exist … the Moroccan minister chose to opt for mystification and fabrication" (Arabi 21, May 13).

So what proof does the Moroccan government actually have?

Despite not making its evidence public, Foreign Minister Bourita has nevertheless claimed that "Morocco has strong proof, including names and specific incidents that indicate Hezbollah is logistically and strategically supporting the Polisario Front" (Morocco World News, May 2). In multiple interviews Bourita has mentioned a file that includes "proven and precise facts: dates of visits by senior officers of Hezbollah in Algeria, dates and venues of meetings with Polisario officials [specifically in the Tindouf camps] and a list of names of agents involved in these contacts" (Morocco World News, May 16). [6] Bourita claims that this file was carefully prepared for weeks on the basis of information collected and cross-checked over several months, and that ties between Iran and Hezbollah to the Polisario can be traced back to 2016 when Hezbollah set up a committee to support the organization's activities. [7]

Moreover, the claims made by Morocco's foreign minister have been corroborated by other sources. On April 24, *The Algerian Times* wrote that the Polisario Front was participating in "continuous military training from Hezbollah in tunnels, dug under the Moroccan defense wall" (Algeria Times, April, 24). Other Algerian media outlets have published photographs of military individuals training in the Polisario camps and quoted them saying that they had benefited from training supervised by Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas (al-Arabiya, May 3).

Photographs of a meeting between Hezbollah and Polisario members in Beirut have also surfaced in which the well-known Polisario activist, Nana Labbat al-Rasheed, can be seen with Ali Fayyad, a member of the Lebanese parliament and leader of Hezbollah, along with five other members from each side (Al3omk May 5). Sources claim the photograph was posted on the Facebook page of a Polisario representative who attended the meeting (Chouftv , May 29).

In terms of matériel, there are specific accusations that Hezbollah sent (surface-to-air) SAM9, SAM11 and Strela missiles to the Polisario through Iran's embassy in Algeria (al-Jazeera, May 1). Meanwhile, local Moroccan news sources have highlighted the continued presence of Polisario fighters and military equipment in the UN buffer zone (Hespress, March 30). Indeed, UN Security Council Resolution 2414, which was adopted on April 27 of this year and extended MINURSO for an additional six months, took the unusual step of explicitly calling on the Polisario Front to withdraw from the area.

An interesting development in the story occurred with the publication of an almost identical article on the websites of two British newspapers toward the end of May alleging that the operations were not simply being run through the Iranian embassy in Algiers by Hezbollah, but were being directed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (The Sun, May 27; The Express, May 28). On the one hand, this development makes sense, in that the IRGC is responsible for overseeing Iran's operations in other countries. On the other, it suggests that the link with the Polisario is no mere one-off, but part of a concerted effort by the Iranian government to expand into Northern Africa. That puts the relationship on a par with Iran's involvement in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. What makes this information unusual, however, is that it appeared only in these two publications, neither of which is noted for their coverage of foreign affairs. Moreover, the sole source for this information appears to have been Dore Gold, the former Israeli ambassador to the UN and a political advisor to Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister. Gold currently serves as president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

Explaining Morocco's Accusations

Putting to one side the issue of their veracity, analysts see in Morocco's accusations three possible motives. The first is the use of these accusations to disrupt UN-mandated negotiations that were due to take place between Morocco and the Polisario Front on the issue of the referendum. Moreover, these accusations, by implicating Iran, Hezbollah and Algeria, would rally further support behind Morocco's autonomy plan while, at the same time, weakening Sahrawi claims for independence.

While plausible, the negotiations between the two sides have been essentially deadlocked for 27 years—Morocco has had no need to resort to such accusations to stall negotiations in the past and it is unclear why it should need to now. Furthermore, as noted previously, UNSC Resolution 2414 was adopted just before the accusations were made public and explicitly identified Polisario activities that had violated the UN ceasefire.

The second possible motive is that the accusations are part of a broader campaign to prepare the Moroccan public for their country's backing of Saudi Arabia as it moves to counter Iran in the Syrian conflict. However, while there has been speculation over increased Saudi involvement in the conflict, it nevertheless seems highly unlikely that this explains the publicization of these accusations (TRT World, June 1). For one thing, Morocco is an authoritarian regime with little reason to court the explicit approval of its citizenry to participate in an external conflict. For another, and perhaps more pertinently, Morocco has recently withdrawn its air force from the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Middle East Monitor, April 16). A related motivation, it is claimed, is that this move by Morocco was to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia in its regional contest with Iran. Again, this seems unlikely to be the explanation, particularly given that relations between the two countries are said to have been strained by Morocco's decision to remain neutral in the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar. [8]

The third possible motive is that the announcement was intended to curry favor with the U.S. administration of Donald Trump and in so doing strengthen its relationship with America. Here, the timing for the release of this information is noteworthy, coming as it did the day after Netanyahu's speech on Iran's nuclear weapons program from 1999 to 2003, and a week ahead of the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Indeed, in making this decision, Trump cited as one of the principal reasons for the decision the fact that "[t]he Iranian regime is the leading state sponsor of terror. It exports dangerous missiles, fuels conflicts across the Middle East, and supports terrorist proxies and militias such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban and Al Qaeda." [9] This explanation appears to be the most plausible based on the fact that Bourita gave an extensive interview about this to Fox News, the cable channel said to be frequently watched by President Trump and influential in affecting his policy preferences. Even then, this explanation is not wholly convincing, as it is unclear what tangible benefit Morocco could expect from such a move.

Iranian Involvement in the Western Sahara

As concerns what Iran hopes to gain in the Western Sahara, again three principal motives have been put forward. The most prominent (and obvious) of these is Iran's desire for regional dominance and the leadership position of a Shia "crescent" of influence. As has been noted above and elsewhere, Iran has provided support and training for militias and proxies in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. Moreover, as revealed by recently declassified CIA intelligence documents, Iran has even provided support to al-Qaeda in the past (al-Jazeera, November 3, 2017). As such, the Western Saharan issue offers the opportunity to extend its strategic influence into North Africa, while its location also offers access to the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, given Morocco's proximity to Europe, any instability in the country may negatively impact Europe's security and so offer Iran leverage in negotiations over the JCPOA. As to the credence of such accusations, given Iran's past and ongoing behavior in the region, these would appear to be highly plausible and so, in effect, the question becomes one concerning the intent of Iran's participation in this conflict: does the Western Sahara represent a new "front" in this regional battle, or is it merely a one-off?

An alternative explanation put forward centers on Hezbollah and its use of Africa for profiteering to fund its activities in the Middle East. Hezbollah is extensively involved in drugs and arms trafficking and West Africa and it seems plausible that the group's involvement is related to profiteering, not least because of the Polisario's own involvement in the illegal arms trade in the region. That said, accepting this explanation suggests Iran's involvement in this conflict is primarily about profiteering rather than regional dominance, notwithstanding the possibility that these two explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. [10]

The third explanation focuses on Algeria and, in particular, its "rivalry" with Morocco. Clearly, Algeria has played a pivotal role, both in terms of permitting the Iranian embassy in Algiers to conduct operations and allowing Hezbollah officials to visit Tindouf. Allied to these is its long-lasting and continuous support of the Polisario Front. Moreover, there have been numerous reports of

Algerian officials training Sahrawi youths to provoke Moroccan law enforcement agents and incite unrest in major cities in the Sahara (Sahara News, September 15, 2014). While there is no doubt that tensions exist between Algeria and Morocco as neighboring countries, it is also the case that the countries can cooperate, as recently evidenced by Algeria's vote for Morocco's 2026 World Cup bid and King Mohammed VI's subsequent suggestion that Algeria and Morocco put forward a joint bid to host the 2030 tournament (Moroccan World News, June 21). Moreover, it remains unclear how any escalation in the conflict would be beneficial to Algeria, as it would very likely to spill into its territory.

On Balance

Based on the available evidence in the public domain, the accusations put forward by Morocco appear more credible than the denials offered by Iran, Hezbollah and Algeria. However, what cannot be ascertained from these accusations is the intent and extent of Iranian involvement in the Western Saharan conflict.

Certainly, Morocco's public announcement of these charges and its suspension of diplomatic relations are not unprecedented, and at this stage it would appear the involvement of Iran is not sufficiently serious to warrant a military response. Instead, the actions of the Moroccan government may be intended to dissuade Iran from further engagement in the conflict over the Western Sahara. Whether Iran heeds this warning will be the deciding factor for where things go next.

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NOTES

[1] In 1975, the Polisario withdrew from the Western Sahara and set up camps in and around Tindouf with the permission of the Algerian government. They remain in place to this day. The sites are commonly known as Laayoune, Smara, Aouserd, and Dakhla.

[2] The name is a translation from the Spanish name for the group *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro*

[3] The UN lists this as the last remaining major territory on its list of Non-Self Governing Territories. See http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/nonselfgovterritories.shtml [accessed 06/21/18]

[4] An additional, albeit less urgent, concern is that the granting of independence to SADR may intensify separatist claims in other parts of the Maghreb, particularly the Berber movements in Algeria and Morocco as well as the Tuareg in Algeria and Libya.

[5] This accusation was supported by the foreign minister of Mali, Tieman Coulibaly, who in 2013 confirmed that Polisario militia members were recruited and paid monthly salaries to fight for MUJAO (Morocco On The Move, June 2014).

[6] The names include: Haidar Sobhi Habib, chief of Hezbollah's external operations; Ali Moussa Dakdouk, military advisor to Hezbollah; and Haj Abou Wael Zalzali, head of military training and logistics.

[7] An interview with an expert in international law, immigration, and the Sahara conflict, Sabri al-Haw that appeared in the Moroccan news outlet Hespress claimed that said that Moroccan officials acquired this information through a report by the Flemish Institute of Peace entitled "Illicit Gun Markets and Firearms Acquisition of Terrorist Networks in Europe" that was issued in April (Gulf News, May 2).

[8] Indeed, this tension is said to explain why Saudi Arabia not only voted but also actively lobbied for the U.S. 2026 Soccer World Cup bid over that of Morocco's (Moroccan World News, June 6).

[9] The text of this speech can be found at Whitehouse.gov (May 8). This point was expanded upon in Secretary

of State Pompeo's speech on Iran delivered some two weeks later, in which three of the twelve "basic requirements" for future US-Iran engagement were concerned with its activities overseas. Interestingly, though he name-checked Iranian involvement in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, no direct mention of the Western Sahara was made (US State Department, May 21).

[10] For its part, Morocco's foreign minister proposed that Hezbollah's involvement was actually in retaliation for Morocco allowing Qassim Tajuddin, a Lebanese-Sierra Leonean businessman with ties to the Hezbollah leadership, to be extradited to the United States following his arrest at Casablanca airport in March of 2017.